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THE NEW DECAMERON

THE NEW DECAMERON

THE THIRD VOLUME, CONTAINING
STORIES BY

COMPTON MACKENZIE
J. D. BERESFORD
D. H. LAWRENCE
DESMOND COKE
MICHAEL SADLEIR
NORMAN DAVEY
STORM JAMESON
ROBERT KEABLE
V. SACKVILLE WEST
AND
BILL NOBBS

OXFORD
BASIL BLACKWELL
1922

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A NOTE IN SUMMARY OF WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

THE first two volumes of "The New Decameron" told of the departure from London of a party of men and women, participators in an unconventional tour through Europe under the guidance of Mr. Hector Turpin, organiser and inventor of Turpin's Temperamental Tours.

The members of the party formed the habit of telling stories at suitable moments of their journey, and ten tales each day were accounted a suitable and desirable diversion.

By the late evening of the second day they were ensconced in basket chairs on the terrace of a fine château in Northern France, listening to the last instalment of the second series of tales. The persons present were Turpin the Courier; Professor Barnabas MacWhirter-Smith; Father Anthony, a Priest; Mrs. Dane-Vereker, a Lady of Fashion; Mary Pennock, a Woman Doctor; Vivian Spencer, of the

SUMMARY OF WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Foreign Office; Peter Brown, of Chelsea; Henry Scott, of the Psychical Research Society; Buck, a retired master-printer; and Herrick, a minor poet. Miss Pogson, a Schoolmarm, and Amélie, the Lady of Fashion's French maid, had gone early to bed, and therefore escaped the fearsome and terrific happenings with which terminated the second volume of "The New Decameron." The pages that follow relate the sequel to those sensational events.

PART I.—THE TRAMP

ALONG a dusty road in northern France a lean, scarecrow figure ambled unconcernedly. It was a bright summer day and the sun shone hotly through dust-laden air on stretches of ploughland, caked to the semblance of dry porridge, on the grey untidy grass that fringed the road, on the indifferent isolation of a few gawky trees, pointing irregularly to right and left their bushy top-knots at the hard blue sky.

The ambling figure whistled as he walked—tunes from *The Mikado* and from *Véronique*—while at his heels bundled a black, exhausted dog whose family tree had years ago been chopped for firewood, leaving along the air a doubtful scent of promiscuous marriage and bends sinister.

Noting to his right a small coppice that promised shade and a soft resting-place on this so arid afternoon, the tramp struck off the road and, making his way over a field of short grass starred with scabious, entered the shadows of the little wood. The undergrowth was thick and he was glad, after a few yards of painful progress, to find himself at the edge of a small clearing, in the centre

of which long grass and flowering thyme clustered about a low mound. A single thorn grew by this mound, throwing on the grass a blue blot of shadow.

"Come on, Baba!" he cried. "Here's the place. We'll have something to eat."

And he slung his pack to the ground with a long sigh of weariness.

Certainly this retired and shady spot was a pleasant change from the tedious glare of the high road. The tramp chewed bread and cheese contentedly, throwing a scrap now and again to Baba, who lay at his feet watching with intent but patient eyes the progress of his master's meal. The grass was soft; the shadow cool and quiet; the steep slope of the mound was good to lean against. The meal over, the tramp lit his pipe and lost himself in drowsy reverie. Baba, flat on his side, his four legs stretched out in absolute abandon of fatigue, wooed sleep and won her with the admirable dispatch of which all dogs—legitimate or otherwise—possess instinctively the secret.

There is a state, half-waking and half-sleeping, when realities have the mistiness of dream and dreams are vivid as the harshest truth. To the tramp's consciousness, bemused thus sweetly and thus drowsily, a sound of voices vaguely penetrated. They were distinct but oddly muffled, and the listener was grateful for both qualities in an interruption that might have mortified by brusquerie or tantalised by inaudible suggestion. He was too comfortable to worry whence they came,

and yet awake enough to follow with aloof intelligence the meaning of their words. That they were English voices speaking English words, and that this remote coppice was in France, worried him no whit. Was he not English also? Besides, to the dreamer, race and probability are negligible trifles, and the tramp was too well at his ease to quarrel if twice four made nine.

"*My* opinion?" said one voice. "My dear Professor, we bureaucrats have *no* political opinion. We are forbidden. We have pensions and paper-clips, but no views of party."

A faint crackling of newspaper was the sole reply. The same voice spoke again.

"It is a week old, Professor, that *Daily Mail*. I understand even the current issues to be unreliable; those that are out of date must be singularly removed from fact."

"My excellent young friend," said another voice—thin and precise—"I have recourse to this journal solely on account of the absence of more congenial reading matter. I seek for no enlightenment on matter of fact. All facts were established by the ancients. I divert my mind, condemned otherwise through no fault of its own to—er—fust in me unused, with the petty squabbles of the age and the frivolities of public affairs. Hence my inquiry about Irish Government. Since, however, you are little less uninterested in that curiously uninteresting problem than myself, I have turned to another page of this obsolescent paper in search of some other subject, on which you will be pleased to enlighten me."

During the silence that followed this elaborate oration the tramp edged himself a little farther from oblivion, a little nearer to actuality.

"Talks like a Professor!" he thought distastefully. "Is there no escaping the plague of education? Am I to be pursued all my life by grotesque figures symbolic of my past? At least the other is a bureaucrat. He said so. But even he may be an official of the Board of Education! As bad, if not worse. I am dreaming. This is a nightmare. I——"

The growing agitation of his mind sank to stillness at the bidding of renewed curiosity. The "Professor" began once more to speak.

THE PROFESSOR ON BIRDS AND DREAMS

By BILL NOBBS

"I PERCEIVE from this news-sheet," he said—and a bout of paper-crackling, more intense than before, implied the folding, refolding, and flattening of the week-old number of England's daily pride—"I perceive from this news-sheet that an attack is in progress on the 'gilded popinjays' of our Foreign Office. It is evident the writer has formed for himself a most erroneous notion of the intelligence of birds, which is, I am persuaded, not infrequently of a very notable order."

"Quite," replied the Bureaucrat. "I remember how my Aunt Edith used to complain of a homing pigeon, which settled on her window sill in the mornings, while she was preparing for the day, and forced her to draw the blinds. It was a great inconvenience. The bird, she was never tired of assuring us, had a most *clever* face."

The Professor was certainly less than interested in the observations upon Natural History of his companion's Aunt Edith. Clearly, however, he

had the manners of the polite world, for he murmured urbanely, " I had not the pleasure of your Aunt's acquaintance," before he continued : " The popinjay, in especial, we have it on excellent authority, has been observed to display an astounding sagacity in circumstances of such a kind as demand it. There was once a gentleman of Great Britain, whose name——"

" Call him Mr. Smith," the voice of the Bureaucrat broke in hastily.

" If you please," said the Professor. " I was about to suggest it. This gentleman possessed a popinjay—which, my authority observes, is so designated either because it was the chief or noble jay or for some other reason—a popinjay of the bluest blood, which he loved tenderly and kept in a cage, whence he often withdrew it to caress. Being on his travels at one time, while overseas in the Holy Land the gentleman paid a visit to the mountains of Gilboa. Here, says my authority, is the favoured home of a large settlement of popinjays, owing to the remarkable freedom from humidity of the atmosphere. Popinjays, it seems, are peculiarly susceptible to moisture, finding it not merely injurious to health but sometimes actually fatal, and King David, as you are well aware, in his grief at the death of King Saul and his own friend, the heir apparent, in that locality, prayed that neither dew nor rain should descend upon it, being thus directly the cause of its suitability for colonisation by these birds. Our traveller, then, seeing a popinjay in the mountains of Gilboa and remembering his own pet, accosted

the stranger with the words, ' My popinjay in his cage at home sends you his greetings.' No sooner had the bird heard these words than it fell like a corpse. The gentleman was much distressed, and, having completed his tour, on his return home narrated to his family the events you have just learned. His popinjay listened with keen attention and the liveliest signs of concern, and with the conclusion of the recital collapsed from its perch in the pangs of dissolution. All present were overwhelmed with astonishment and grief, and the bird was carried into the garden in the hope that the fresh air might revive it. But no sooner did it see the opportunity it had gained by its assumed indisposition than it spread its wings and rapidly disappeared from view, with no thought of return, while its owner was left gradually to recognise, with some warmth of resentment, that the one bird had chosen a most ingenious method of communicating a plan of escape to its captive fellow-country—er—fellow-countryman, which the latter had shown great readiness of wit in grasping and adopting. For my part I do not see why so sagacious an animal should be used by journalists as a type of——"

" Thank you very much, Professor Macwhirter-Smith," said the Bureaucrat. " You cannot guess how much your story has interested me. I wonder if you would permit me, in my turn, to recount to you a somewhat peculiar dream, which my friends have often assured me is quite dissimilar——"

" My dear young man," replied the Professor, " I am aghast at your temerity. Can you be

unaware that any dream is now liable—nay, certain—to be construed in the most horrifying manner? Confess to me, if you will, burglaries or murders you have committed, but in the article of dreams allow me to persuade you to follow my own practice, which is, to memorise one or two useful dreams one may have read (but which the passage of time has rendered exempt from the operation of copyright) and to narrate *these*, with suitable intonation and gesture, whenever the opportunity offers. For instance," proceeded the Professor rapidly, "when the worthy King Rupert was returning from Italy to Germany, with a large following of knights and other soldiers, there were in his train two nobles of the queer sort that is often found in such company. One came from Gronau, the other was called the Beringer. On reaching Switzerland, the whole party stopped to rest for a few days, and one night, while these two were dicing, they got so flushed with the game that the Beringer staked even his horse and armour and lost them, whereat he was so vexed that he commended himself to the Evil One and went to bed. The two lay in the same bed, and as soon as they had fallen asleep the Beringer had a dream. He dreamt that he was in France in the King's Chapel, and there he saw a tomb covered with a golden cover and four golden candlesticks with tapers burning. The candlesticks seemed to him so fine that he thought, if he took only one, it would recoup him for all his losses. So he presently took one and went out. There he found his horse saddled and bridled, and he mounted

and rode off. Thereupon a great hue and cry arose and he was pursued by a crowd of people, who wanted to wrest the precious candlestick from him. So closely was he pressed on all sides that he must needs ride along a narrow lane, where was a gibbet with a man hanging, and, as he rode between the legs of the dead man, the dead man put his shins together and held him ; and it seemed in his dream that one of the pursuers threw an axe, which struck him in the back, so that he fell from his horse and dropped the candlestick.

" When he had dreamt this far, he seemed to become aware of a pain so horrible that he woke up and cried out at the top of his voice, waking his companion in the bed and the others in the inn. They came with lights and he told them his dream, groaning pitifully, and showed them the axe sticking in his back ; and the bed was full of blood, at which they were not a little afraid. At his request a priest was fetched and he was confessed and shriven. A few hours later he died in great repentance for his sins and was buried in the parish church at Tingen."

. . . . .

By this time the tramp was fully awake and greatly diverted by the determination of the learned narrator to hold the hustings of conversation.

" There is certainly no holding the Professor," he thought, and chuckled to himself. " Think of him in a club smoking-room ! "

The next moment, with its now familiar flute-

like quality and precision of utterance, the voice of the learned gentleman was again audible. He was remorseful.

"If I seemed just now to have interrupted you rudely," he said, "I ask your indulgence. I should be sorry to appear guilty of discourtesy, my good young friend. That your dream is exceptional, I am convinced; whether it is susceptible of polite interpretation, I am highly dubious. Therefore, in your own interests, to save you becoming a mere leading case, an instance of the schools, an illustration for callow Freudians, I adjure you to entertain me with some other tale, some happening of adventure or some romance of normal life that has impinged upon your notice, whether as a private citizen or—if I may say so—in your official incapacity."

The listener started as the shrill sound of a fretsaw at work struck on his ears. Then he realised the Professor had laughed. He settled more comfortably among the soft grasses. "What will the civil servant do now?" he wondered.

"Don't know any stories," was the sulky response of the Professor's good young friend. "Besides, telling stories reminds me of that damned fraud Turpin and the fix he has landed us in."

"You are impatient," said the Professor soothingly. "When you are my age you will welcome novelty in whatever guise she comes. I recall an occasion in Messina when novelty met me unexpectedly and almost violently in the narrow way. But I welcomed her, sincerely welcomed her. If you like, I will tell you——"

The Bureaucrat, with desperate firmness, threw himself in the path of this further reminiscence.

" Talking of Messina," he said fiercely, " I do remember a tale now. As a matter of fact I made it up. Wrote it a year ago, lost the manuscript, and found it in the lining of my Gladstone bag the evening we reached that infernal château. I stuck it in my pocket and here it is. I'll read it to you. Are you ready? Then here goes. Incidentally it is about Sirene, not Sicily, but both begin with ' S.' The story is called

" THE MIRROR "

[BY COMPTON MACKENZIE]

THE BUREAUCRAT'S TALE

THE MIRROR

By COMPTON MACKENZIE

I WENT south earlier than usual that year; the dream of an English midsummer night had become a nightmare, and I fled from it to the Island of Sirene, where, with nothing more material to worry over than the contents of a small valise and with nothing more urgent to vex my tired brain than a pocket edition of *Life's Little Ironies,* I sought heart's ease.

It was the time of the vintage, and every day I used to sit in the shade—or rather among the tremulous grey shadows of dusty olive trees, watching the women shuffle past, their arms and faces stained with the juice that oozed from the grapes tightly packed in the baskets they carried upon their heads. The weather was heavy, gathering slowly for the welcome September rain.

So heavy was it that the traditional gladness of the vintage was overcast and, instead of Bacchic mirth and jollity, I perceived only the weariness of tired women pattering along with swollen ankles through the white dust, overweighted with their burden of grapes.

Before me the land ran down in terraces of dishevelled vines to a sea of palest blue, still lustrous and shining indeed, but withal so opaque that like the land it appeared weary of summer.

I tried to remember Shelley's stanzas written in dejection near Naples; but the words eluded me. In any case they would have been inappropriate, for I knew, though the exact phrases may have been escaping me, that the poet's Mediterranean was more limpid than this Mediterranean which I now beheld outspread before me.

I turned away from the sea and tried to lose myself in *Life's Little Ironies*. I have never turned the pages of that volume since, and as I look back on them now they seem each one to reek of the hot asphalt of a shadeless modern promenade. I see a concertina of lodging-houses behind whose crude lace curtains terrible events are enacted to the accompaniment of distant brass bands. "Life," I said to myself, "is not like this. This writer of tales rigs the thimble, loads the dice, his heroes and heroines are puppets whose wires he takes a malicious pleasure in twisting."

My friend Wickham walked by at this moment on his way to some ridiculous tea-party at Anasirene, and, knowing that his admiration for Thomas Hardy was illimitable, I took pleasure in demanding an agreement with my criticism.

"Surely character rather than circumstance," I said, "determines human happiness and human misery."

Wickham surveyed hesitatingly the loops of the road climbing up to Anasirene.

" You tempt me to surrender my tea-party and to argue with you here in the scanty shade of these olive trees. If I yield, the whole course of my life may be altered. Some wonderful woman, unknown, beautiful, and with not less than £2,000 a year, may at this moment be entering Mrs. Van Someren's loggia—some rare rich creature intended for me by character, robbed from me by circumstance."

" On the contrary," I retorted, " if you don't go to Mrs. Van Someren's tea-party, the determining factor will be your own laziness, and if you miss this chance—one in twenty million from what I have seen of Mrs. Van Someren's tea-parties—you will only have your own laziness to blame."

" Nevertheless," said my friend, seating himself beside me, " I can tell you a story, a perfectly true story, that might well be called one of life's little ironies, in which the moral——"

" Oh, if it has a moral," I interrupted, " keep the story for Mrs. Van Someren and her guests. I hate stories with morals."

" The only moral is that Thomas Hardy would tell the story much better than I can," said Wickham, and abruptly, without waiting for me to express my wishes, he began his tale.

" When I first came to Sirene about twenty years ago, the *facchini* were an even more important member of the body politic than they are at present. In those days there was no *funiculare*, so that all the luggage had to be carried from the Marina to the Piazza, not as now merely from the Piazza to the hotels in the neighbourhood or the

remote villas of mad foreigners who build their abodes on the edge of inaccessible cliffs. Even to-day you must often have noticed what a class apart *facchini*, male and female, form. They rarely marry outside their own guild; they drink together, eat together, quarrel together, and rob together. Most of them have bad tempers, which is not surprising when one comes to think of carrying a grand piano a mile and a half in the Sirene sun along a steep, narrow, crooked, and badly-paved path. In those days their tempers were even worse, for they had to carry everything up three or four hundred steps from the Marina to the Piazza.

"At this date there lived in a shop at the corner of the Piazza, hard by the steps that lead up to the Duomo, a butcher called Carlo Bruno. Carlo had been a *facchino* himself in his younger days, and either by superior strength and cunning or by a relentless brutality he had acquired enough to open a business on his own account, in which he put his ferocity to good account by slaughtering cattle.

"He was a gigantic red-faced man, with a mighty moustache of which he was as proud as a Greek brigand.

"In addition to being a bully, he was what is called a good man of business, or, in other words, an unscrupulous and avaricious rascal. Other *facchini* who managed to escape from their fatiguing profession always cut themselves off completely from the past. Not so Carlo. He took advantage of his early association to lend money, and within

a very short time he had all the *facchini* of the island in his clutches.

"I think it was not so much the money he screwed out of them as the opportunity it gave him to bully his clients that afforded the man pleasure. I have seen him come thundering out of his shop, when the *facchini* were drenched with the sweat of their killing ascent from the Marina, and heard him curse them for idle loafers and drive them down again for more burdens, so that they might earn the money to pay him what they owed.

"I have seen him strike the women and kick the men, and because they were *facchini* the rest of the Piazza used to look on without interfering. After all, it was only an affair among the *facchini*, which no civilised person could be expected to understand, still less to adjudicate upon. The *facchini*, as I have said, were a class apart. They did not seem even to keep the ordinary holidays, but had a wintry *festa* of their own on Saint Sebastian's day, when they all got drunk and afterward lighted a large bonfire in the Piazza, round which they would howl and dance when the rest of the Sirene were in bed.

"So, day by day, week by week, Carlo bullied his victims more fiercely, until one evening the *facchini* held a meeting in their own gloomy little *osteria* and decided that the only way to liberate themselves from the butcher was to kill him. It never struck them to call in the help of the law; they recognised that they were in Carlo's power financially, and that unless they could get rid of him altogether it was useless to try to escape his blows.

" To be sure, Antonuccio might go to the *pretore* and start a *querela* against Carlo for breaking his nose last Saturday; but whatever fine were imposed would be wrung out of Antonuccio himself, and next time Carlo might break more than his nose.

" No; to the simple minds of the *facchini* the only solution of their torment was the death of their aggressor. And how was he to be killed? At a given signal half a dozen of the strongest might rush upon Carlo and overwhelm him, stamp on his face, kick him to death, and be rid of him for ever.

" But this meant that half a dozen hard-working *facchini* would suffer as great evils at the hands of the law as they had suffered at the hands of their persecutor. The fairest way for the greatest number would be to draw lots and let the one chosen by fortune use his knife. They would do their best to protect their liberator against the law; they would subscribe the money to get him away to Argentina. If they did not succeed —*allora*, it was one *facchino* for many, and certainly one man would always have a better chance of escaping than six.

" So lots were drawn, and the choice fell on Raffaello Ferraro, a young man of twenty-three, who was to be married after *pasqua*; and *quaresima* was half-way done. Everybody agreed how unfortunate it was that the lot should have fallen on poor Raffaello, but . . . I was not at the meeting myself, of course, but I can imagine the shrug with which everybody would express his

sense of fate's decree. It never entered Raffaello's head to contest the result; the best he could hope for was to catch Carlo unaware, and when he had stabbed him to the heart to escape with his bride to the Argentine; as for the other *facchini*, they agreed to put up with Carlo's bullying until Raffaello was married and not to press him too hard, so that he could wait his opportunity.

"Carlo, who, you will remember, had been a *facchino* himself, may have divined that the breaking-point had been reached, or there may have been a traitor at that secret assembly, somebody who sold his fellows for the money he owed the butcher. Certainly, it was noticeable that he never gave Raffaello that opportunity to catch him unaware; and when the young man had been married a fortnight the other *facchini* began to grumble and to ask how much longer Raffaello intended to keep them waiting for their freedom.

"They had reason to complain, they felt; for if Carlo was more cautious about his movements after dusk, his conduct in the Piazza was more brutal than it had ever been. There was not a *facchino* who escaped the marks of his fist that month, and in view of what they had to put up with it was natural to wish the sentence carried out immediately.

"It never entered Raffaello's head to disown his obligation; when his fellows urged him to be quick, he merely begged them to be patient for a little while and give him a favourable opportunity. Nor did Assunta, his wife, herself a *facchina*, suggest to him that he should break his oath.

" Italy has always been the most fruitful soil for secret societies, and what had been determined by the *facchini* of Sirene was only a replica of what was being determined by the Camorra or the Mafia or the Mano Nera every day. Raffaello was tall, young, and handsome ; he had not been a *facchino* long enough for that monstrous growth of muscle to disfigure him, nor for excess of wine to bloat his countenance. His wife Assunta was his match in comeliness. She was barely eighteen, and might not coarsen under the exacting life for another year or so.

" Raffaello had a brother, a hunchback called Domenico, or rather christened Domenico, for he was always called *'O gobbetto*. Many deformed children are borne by the wives of *facchini*, who work day in and day out with their husbands. When Raffaello married, he took his younger brother to live with him as he had lived with him since their father and mother died. Raffaello had always been kind to the hunchback, and out of pity for his deformity he had never allowed him to carry heavy loads, but had encouraged him to accept small jobs from benevolent *forestieri*. Lying awake one night, Domenico overheard his brother bemoaning to his newly-married wife a misfortune that now seemed doubly hard, because there was no longer any doubt that Assunta was with child.

" In the morning Domenico took Raffaello aside and asked him if it were really true that he must kill Carlo Bruno, *'o macellaio*. It was typical of that close corporation of *facchini*, that not even the younger Ferraro had been told a word about

the drawing of lots, and I cannot believe that there really was a traitor at the gathering; yet Carlo undoubtedly sniffed danger in the air, for he kept himself more unapproachable than ever.

"I happen to be able to tell you this story more or less from the inside, because Domenico used to work in a small way in my garden, and I was so far involved in the crime as to have an old knife of mine that hung in my hall used as the weapon to dispatch the butcher. Well, after Domenico, poor boy, knew what lay before his brother, he went out much perturbed in spirit to work. Passing a shop window on the way, he caught sight of his reflection in the glass.

"It seemed to him terrible that one so young and strong and handsome as his brother should be sacrificed, when there was he, deformed, despised by women, useless, to take his place.

"This happened to be the hunchback's day for tidying my small garden. When he went to collect his tools, he saw that knife of mine hanging in the hall beside the old-fashioned Venetian mirror, which with its pink and blue cherubs still hangs in my hall: you have often admired its rococo beauty. For the second time that morning poor Domenico looked at himself in a glass, and this time far more clearly than in the shop window he regarded his deformity.

"And he also observed the rococo cherubs. There came to his mind the memory of what he had heard the night before about Assunta's condition; he remembered how, at the wedding, all the guests had laughed and clapped their hands and

loudly wished Raffaello and Assunta *cento figli maschi. Povero Raffaello!* perhaps he would never know the joys of one son. His gaze went beyond the pink and blue cherubs to the knife, and in a moment he made up his mind to show his brother that he was grateful.

" Domenico slipped the knife under his coat and hurried down to the Piazza. The morning boat had just arrived, bringing the usual crowd of tourists on a fine May morning. The tyrant Carlo Bruno was there, gross, red-faced, tremendous. He cursed his slaves and twirled his big moustache. He clouted the women, kicked the men, and even from one woman he snatched her child because she was fumbling with a trunk. He was more ferocious than ever. The tormented *facchini* would not allow Raffaello much longer grace ; already they were looking at him in menacing reproach as though he were the author of their ills. The German tourists were grunting out their ' wunderschöns ; ' the American tourists were miaowing their ' cutes ' ; the English tourists were chirping their ' pretties ' . . . suddenly the butcher gave a roar of fury and pain and fell forward on his face in a puddle of blood. *'O gobbetto* had ripped up his stomach with my knife, which, by the way, I never got back from the police."

" Is that the irony of your tale ? " I asked. I was not meaning to be flippant ; but I resented the sacrifice of Domenico to a situation that in England would have been so effectively dealt with much earlier by the police.

"No," said Wickham. "The irony of my tale is that Raffaello Ferraro was killed a week later by the fall of a large packing-case from the inadequate Sirene crane, that his brother Domenico is still alive, buried alive in the dark dungeons of Ponza, and that Assunta's child is that dreadful creature who crawls on all fours along the Strada Nuova whining for alms."

Well did I know that appalling cripple, a boy of sixteen with the face of an aged man.

"And Domenico is still alive?" I murmured. Wickham nodded.

A light *maestrale* had sprung up since my friend began his tale. The Mediterranean was once more joyous and crystalline; the little waves danced like white flowers in the cool breeze. The women with their baskets of grapes were chanting old songs of the vintage. It was good to be sitting beneath an olive tree in Italy again.

"And Domenico is still alive in that hell!"

I pointed to the far horizon, where fifty miles away it was blurred by the dark outline of the Ponza Islands.

"We shall have rain soon," Wickham prophesied. "One does not see those islands from Sirene in fair weather."

. . . . .

Some little while before the Bureaucrat had finished his story, the tramp had become aware of pins and needles in one foot and of the presence of a thistle among the grass upon which he sat. When, therefore, the tale to which uninvited he had listened came to an end, he rose, a little stiffly

—for he was cramped with long lying in the one position—rose, stretched, and turned mechanically to regard the clearing in which an hour had so pleasantly been dozed away, whose ghostly voices had so singularly diverted his siesta. With a start that arrested his arms half-way between the horizontal of stretching and the perpendicular of normal activity, he observed smoke arising from the centre of the tangled mound.

"Good Lord," he thought, "the grass is afire!"

But the thin thread of smoke wandering gently, intermittently upward did not gain in volume. Also it was clear, almost transparent in texture; not at all the smoke of burning hay. With two steps the tramp gained the summit of the mound.

To his amazement he found himself standing over a heavy iron grille, between the bars of which a pale wisp of smoke filtered idly upward. Instinctively he steadied himself against noise in movement. Cautiously he dropped on one knee and parted with careful hands the leaves and matted stalks that overgrew the grating. Thus revealed, it appeared an amazingly strong affair, its bars clamped together, their ends embedded in solid concrete. Weathered though they were, the metal and its surrounding setting seemed as firm as though they were the work of yesterday. "Regular prison bars," thought the tramp, and bent his head towards the black depths beneath the forbidding grille. The strong sunlight, falling athwart the iron bars, lit clearly about two feet of rocky wall, but threw into inky shadow the rest of the mysterious dungeon. As the tramp craned

over the more equally to pit his eyesight against the darkness, one of the voices heard earlier and as though in dream—that of the Professor—rose from the obscurity.

"Prolonged seclusion in this peculiar residence grows tedious," it said. "Are you persuaded there is no exit through the grating in the roof?"

Involuntarily the tramp replied.

"I'm afraid not, sir," he said. "It's as firm as a rock."

A whistle sounded from below.

"Hullo!" cried the voice of the Bureaucrat. "Who's that? Who are you? Where are we? Can you get us out of this damned hole?"

"One at a time, please!" cried the tramp. "It's I. That is one. I am a wandering mendicant. That is two. You are in France. That is three. It doesn't seem likely. That is four. Dummy's lead."

"For God's sake don't be funny!" snarled the unseen but angry official. "Shove a stick down the grating and let me scramble up a moment."

The tramp did as requested. In a few moments the dusty head and pale, bad-tempered face of a young man in an expensive but torn tweed coat emerged from blackness into sunshine. Their owner blinkingly regarded his possible rescuer through the bars of his prison.

"What did you say you were?" he demanded.

"I am a tramp."

"You look like one all right, but then so do I. And I'm not and you're not. Start again. Who are you?"

"A tramp," replied the ragged visitor patiently. "I am not pulling your leg. But you *are* pulling my arm—nearly out of its socket. If I leave go of the stick, what will you fall on?"

"On the Professor," returned the Bureaucrat, grinning. "He'd hate it. Hold on a moment longer while I find a hold."

After some scrabbling, the imprisoned youth succeeded in wedging himself across the funnel of rock and concrete that connected the grille with the underground cavern, in which, it appeared, he and his learned companion had for two days been imprisoned. How they found their way to so lugubrious a lodgment he did not explain, his mind dwelling rather on escape than on the events of the recent past.

"Are you hungry?" asked the tramp.

"No," snapped the Bureaucrat. "We've plenty to eat. But we're tired of playing rabbits and want to go home. Do you take me?"

The young man's impatience and discourteous sarcasm called for the tramp's sense of mischievous humour. He played for time.

"Is there no passage to your cave? You can't have got in through this grating; it hasn't been touched for years."

"Heaven help the man! Should we ask to be *got* out if we could *walk* out? There was a passage, but it's fallen in. Two moles had a sneezing match and the soil took flight for yards round. So we were pinched. Is *that* clear?"

"Perfectly," replied the tramp with ceremony. "Perfectly. How you are to get out is less so. I

shall have to go for help, and it is five miles to St. Hilaire, the nearest town. You must resign yourselves to a while longer in captivity. Besides, how do I know you are not better where you are? I must consider the common weal."

And he bowed his head in mockery of thought.

The Bureaucrat snorted, made a rash gesture of impatience, lost his footing and vanished into the gloom. A thump, a scuffle, and two imprecations —one in obscure, the other in plain English—told a sad tale of professorial ills and bruised officialdom.

"There is a further point," went on the tramp, as if no interruption had taken place and with a deliberation calculated to provoke his listeners to the limits of endurance, "which affects my personal feeling in this matter. One of you is admittedly an educationalist. The other may be as bad. A Professor and an official of the Board! And *I* of all men am asked to deliver them! Truly there are no limits to human impertinence."

"Verbose unknown!" came the voice of the Professor, oratorical, a little august, from the blackness of his prison, "your unjust dislike of my philological activity arouses my curiosity. I should be interested to hear what grudge you have against learning—useless learning, mind you. Explain your grievance and, your heart thus lightened of its burden, make all speed to extricate us from this prison."

The tramp smiled at the unexpected overture.

"More tale-telling? Surely there have been stories enough for one afternoon?"

"Yes—and more than enough!" growled the Bureaucrat. His voice was faint and distant. Perhaps he nursed his bruises in a remote corner of the cave.

"Dear, dear!" said the Professor. "As if human frailty could ever be too exhaustively disclosed! Ignore the protests of my young friend," he continued, "and recount your story. A tramp in fact is not always a tramp in fancy, and I suppose that beneath your pose of errant beggary something lurks—probably enough disreputable but perhaps diverting."

"I never yet told a story down a mineshaft," said the tramp. "Probably vocal subtlety will be lost. I must consider a moment the right inflection and technique. I warn you also that the tale is that of my dog, rather than of myself. You cannot see Baba, but he is here—very much here."

For a few moments complete silence reigned. Then

THE TRAMP'S TALE

THE FAITHFUL FRIEND

By DESMOND COKE

I KNOW (he began suddenly in a slow, restful monotone) it is the fashion now to blame everything upon the virtues, if only because our great-aunts were so brutal to the vices. Either point of view may be correct, or neither; or Truth—as Aristotle saw—may lie midway between them; but it is, anyhow, minutely true that I have been ruined, driven into what you see, by a certain grim relentless trait of passive Fidelity.

It will possibly surprise you (he went on, with no change whatever in his lugubrious tone) to hear me talking of "Aristotle" without prefixing the now customary aspirate. These very words, "minutely," "passive," "customary," "prefix," may even seem to come strangely from the top of a ragged suit that has neither tie nor collar. At any rate I hope so. That was why I used them. . . . But I see now that it was youthful and absurd of me to worry so much about the world's opinion of myself, and I will try to talk more simply, for it is a simple story, and even if I should impress you at the start by seeming a most learned fellow, I should still earn laughter towards the end for letting it be what it is. Yes, what says the philo-

sopher? "Life is a Comedy to those who think, a Tragedy to those who feel": and, however low I may have been sunk, myself, by the abominable loyalty of such a friend as no man ever had and by my own conventional failure to repel it, I am sure that you, at any rate, have kept yourselves aloofly intellectual; among the Gods that laugh.

If so, you will at least realise that all this dignified opening is just a trick—very human, extremely obvious—to let you understand that in origin I am even as yourselves: "the son of poor but respectable parents," "the product of a Public School," "the loyal alumnus of my Alma Mater"—in fact, everything radiant and full of promise that has ever been made stuffy and commonplace by the perverse magic of a Fleet Street tag.

But there I am, off on my windy phrases once again! Excuse me. I am not like that as a rule. I think I am nervously dreading the revelation on which I have started: so tragically vital to myself, so pitifully abject to such of you as listen till the end: but no matter, I will get at it without more bitterness or hiding behind words.

I was, I say, well born; educated like my fellows; and thought something of a scholar, as well as not a little of a sportsman. Life spread itself ahead of me—but no, I promised to get on! Enough to say I had an almost brilliant youth.

You may justly object at this point that after what I have said, you can well understand how I have (it seems) ended as a tramp, but that you cannot at all comprehend why I ever started as an usher. . . . Oh, yes, I was a schoolmaster. I

thought I had told you that! As to the reasons: —well, why does a man, fresh from the University, decide on any one career? You must admit the imps of Comedy, if only on the basis of that random choice. I chose to become schoolmaster for half a dozen reasons very good to twenty-three, if now rather feeble—I confess—to the severer logic of my forties. I should still get games; the holidays were long; I had no strong wish for any other life; above all, to be brief about this, it seemed easy . . . I succumbed. What did the fifties and the sixties matter to me, scarcely then out of my "teens"? I could do something different later: and so, you see, it has turned out!

But I was doing well, succeeding. Keenness took the place of that conviction, that belief in education, which I should have had, and I easily hid my hereditary idleness under the physical energy of Youth. The boys learnt little from me, I am much afraid: but I am sure that they learnt no more from any of the other masters, and they liked many of them less. I was excellent at nets, and in general always ready to oblige by helping at anything which held my interest. I sometimes recited on Saturday nights, but not often, and I never buttonholed the boys or asked them out for strolls. I was a strict disciplinarian when anything came beneath my notice, but I avoided the odium of detective work. The testimonials that I received on leaving increased in warmness with my age. Altogether, on my fortieth birthday, a very solemn landmark in any career, I saw no

good cause to regret that young Undergraduate's careless and momentous choice. A year later I was offered the position of housemaster in a school where I had been two years.

Now comes the peripety—I beg your pardon, the change of fortune, the gloomy side of the gingerbread, whatever you may choose to call it. Why haggle about names? It is here.

(He stooped wearily and touched a shapeless hairy mass of black that straggled at his feet. It quivered, stretched, formed itself into some random sort of shape, and finally stood revealed as a fantastically monstrous cur which feverishly licked its master's hand, as if in joy at a new finding of him, and gazed up with a sentimental wisdom through the surprising beauty of soft yellow eyes that lit and redeemed its coal-black shaggy ugliness.)

This hybrid inspiration (went on the tramp, seemingly moved to a new flow of fine language but still on one low mournful note;) what the romantic dealer wittily described as of the spaniel "variety"; this truly varied nondescript, that in itself suffices to prove the Creator's artistic supremacy and humour; this creature, I say, whom for obvious reasons I call Baa-baa; the most faithful and most foolish of all created insects, not excluding Woman; this *dog*, for one must find a word, is the fount and origin of all my troubles. *Fons et origo*, Baba: that's just what you are, and not a very clean one either.

Of course (he went on, abruptly changing to a manner of more homely confidence, as if now on

easier ground), he didn't always look like this. He was quite different as a baby. For one thing, he was smaller. I quite believed he would become a spaniel in time. Anyhow, he looked up at me with those wise yellow eyes, and shivered in the man's threadbare coat—very much like mine now—and stretched a paw to claim me, and I fell. It was the holidays before the term that was to see me a housemaster. I told myself that there would be somewhere in the house for him and that the boys would like him.

I was right in both, but not as I expected. In the six weeks that remained of the long summer holidays he grew with alarming rapidity, and when term came I was to learn that there was truly somewhere in the house for him—the spot where I was at the moment—and that the boys liked him, as the luxury at last of a real joke against their master. As I went around the playing-fields or study passages with my black doom behind me, I could easily hear that my nickname had changed. Last term's had been almost flattering and at least from a severely classic source; this term's had its origin in a crude inaccurate mingling of two baby-rhymes. My woolly pet was given the name I have already mentioned to you, Baa-baa, or more briefly Baba, nor was I long in learning that his fidelity to me had gained me the ignominious name of Mary. . . .

I realise how little all this is to you, but it is more to a schoolmaster, much more to a new housemaster anxious to impress his boys. I felt that, where I should be assuming a slightly more

pompous attitude as suiting my position, I had in effect for the first time become a figure almost farcical in my absurdity: Mary with her little lamb.

You may say—many *did* say—why not tie the mongrel up? During the holidays I did at first: but he was so soft and hairy that no collar seemed to hold him long, unless I tied it really tight, when all the neighbouring wives wrote to protest about the noise and my brutality towards the dumb creation. Besides, Baba didn't like it. . . . If he failed to get free, I found him dejected and terrified, with panting flanks, on my return. The poor simple fool always thought I had deserted him. He jibbered at me as at one back from the dead and made the neighbours mad. So I gave in, and he was happy following me round. I missed him too, I must admit, when I went out alone. One does appreciate Fidelity, at forty. . . .

When, however, the second day of term saw the school work beginning, it was different. As suited my new dignity of housemaster, I had been promoted, after two years of the Upper Third, to the now vacant Remove; and in taking a form, it is only the first day that counts. Poor Baba, as I too grew to call him, therefore had to be tied up; and, with a little secret nervousness but much outer magnificence, I stode down the central path to introduce myself to my new bigger boys. But I felt somehow incomplete and wished that Baba had been with me.

Before I stepped into the Main Hall, he *was*!—leaping at me, squirming, squeaking, smiling: all

the old symptoms of mixed relief, penitence, and exultation.

I own that I was angry. Heads could be seen already, peering over the opaque-glazed lower panes of my new room form. To take the idiot back to my house and be five minutes late would be a fatal start. To give him to a boy, who would let him escape for fun if Baba failed to wriggle free in earnest—this would be still worse. *Quem Deus vult perdere, prius dementat :* I decided he must come with me for once. Perhaps he would lie down and sleep.

The boys, less irresponsible than my young scallawags of other terms, were back at their desks and stood up formally as I came in : but behind their grave faces I could read dangerously strangled laughter, and I knew, of course, that it was war to the knife between us, for any form will rag its master if the fates follow, and I felt that—to mix my figures further—the dice was loaded in the boys' favour by this black beast behind me.

" Lie down," I said sternly, with a real air of believing in my order.

I think he somehow understood the peril, or possibly he was hurt by my tone, for he actually subsided in a dark limp mass below my feet. I suspected that two yellow eyes, projected from a snout along two paws, were steadily regarding my new pupils, and I cannot pretend that this anxiety made me give of my best as teacher. All went strangely well, however, till I began asking questions. Then Baba, who is a creature of strong moods, did not *like* boys putting up their

hands. He barked as each was raised—and seldom have I seen so many boys alert to answer. His barks became continual and plaintive. I could almost hear the masters above and below me emulating their wives by sending messages of anger. I gave Baba a shrewd kick. He howled, a musical diminuendo howl. Most of the boys laughed. A few, older and more subtle, muttered half-heard protests or made tut-tut sounds. I felt, for the first time in my career as master, the shameful helpless fear of the man who knows he is losing control. I moistened my tongue and forced my lips to sternness.

"Don't put up your hands," I said; "it's a cheap board-school habit. I shall ask questions where I like, not where you do." I tortured myself to facetiousness. "I want to catch you out, you know!"

Nobody laughed, and I felt I was doomed: but Baba, to my relief, also welcomed my remarks in silence. Perhaps he was offended at my kick, or the room's heat may have made him sleepy. Whatever the cause, a blessed quiet fell upon him, and the form responded to his lead. Five minutes, seeming like hours in the tension of dread and vigilance: then—never so welcome to any boy, however ill prepared his construe—that deep boom of the clock which told me the period was over.

"What have you got now?" I asked blandly, knowing well the answer, but dreading that nobody might care to give it.

"Science, sir," replied, to my relief, some boy

whom I yet instinctively despised as he gave me fresh dignity.

"You can go quietly," I said. Baba started up in fury at their general movement, and barks mingled with loud mocking laughter in the passage formed the last moments of my first hour with the Remove.

You may consider that I drew the wrong moral from my pet's tenacity of faithfulness, but, going over it all again and again now as I tramp from town to town, I still think I acted for the best. I reflected that he would inevitably escape again, if I should tie him up; that if he did not, he would infuriate the master's wives and babies; that, now he had once been in school, the worst probably was over. I brought him down to the third hour. It gave me, anyhow, a sense of triumph over the Remove and Fate, to bring the dog in thus of my set purpose; and besides, I did awfully, you know, like him to be there. . . .

He was delighted, and soon settled down to sleep. The boys, always inconsequent and out for novelty, forgot him so soon as they found he was useless in their unceasing effort to smash my discipline. Sometimes, it is true, he helped them. Sleepy but vigilant, the true watch-dog, he was up in a moment at a sudden noise: and on this fact they played with diabolic subtlety until they learnt that any movement loud or abrupt enough to draw his bark was also sufficiently an outrage to excuse my punishment. The cards always favour a master, even if he were not intended to be thought a beast; and so within ten days I was able to assure

myself that, though my dog undoubtedly had gained a victory over me by his importunacy, I had at any rate mastered the Remove and taught even him how to behave in Form. The master's wives ceased writing; the babies slept; I got laughter for my pedagogic wit; Xenophon marched a creditable number of parasangs, each lesson; Baba seldom snored or barked at bunnies in his sleep; and everything seemed to have settled down for the best in the best of possible worlds.

What a cynical, delusive hag is Fate! And how cleverly does she produce, to wreck a fool, an even bigger ass!

I often wonder: if I had been allowed to prosper and rise, should I have become as fatuous and tape-tied as the average of head masters? Should I have had no interest in any course except the tried and stale? Such, at any rate, was the mind of the self-satisfied idiot who approached me on the football field before the end of this same day and asked me whether I was busy. I hastened to be futile and to throw in the loved title of respect.

"Now or as a rule, sir?"

"Now, Dash," and he added my name (which matters to none of you), in a tone of mixed seriousness and benevolence which instantly told me that he had evolved a little scene or lecture for my welfare.

Of course I was not busy, I assured him. Then he would like a little chat with me. He led the way imposingly towards his house, as if to show that it was a matter altogether beyond playing-

fields. Obedient and absurdly nervous, I fell in behind him. The dog followed on.

Presently, as if to prove the absence of ill feeling, the head master turned towards me and made a comment on the fine state of the weather. With this honesty forced me to concur. We walked on again in silence.

"Come in, Dash," he said, with the same threatening geniality when we were at his study door. Then, as I entered, he added, more angrily: "Leave the *dog* outside," at which, with a savage push at Baba's broad but flabby chest, he thrust him backwards; hurried into the room; and rapidly reassuming dignity, motioned me to a straight-backed chair as it had been a guillotine.

"It is about that animal that I want to speak," he started. "It has never been my idea, or indeed my practice"—a phrase that seemed to give him pleasure, for he chewed it firmly—"to dictate to my masters on the social side. There are, I mean, schools where it is demanded that housemasters must be married men, and so forth: but I have always left these matters to the discretion of my staff, nor, I may say, have I been disappointed. I think you will acquit me of any interference in your personal concerns!"

He almost melted to a smile, and I hastily reassured him with a gestured platitude: totally immersed in hideous anxiety as to my dog. Would his fidelity, that I had often cursed before, now serve me by keeping him outside the door, or might he not, at this very moment, be making hay in the head master's ante-room; raiding his

meagre larder; alarming his eleemosynary spouse; terrifying her pasty infants into a lifelong and hereditary imbecility? Vistas, illimitable vistas. . . . The words came to me through a distant haze of ever-shifting apprehension.

"When, however, it comes to dogs in form, I consider that I have the right to speak. Even there, mind you," he added rapidly, as if afraid that narrowness might be laid to his charge: "were the dog of decent breeding and properly behaved, I might be willing to consider the case upon its special merits: but you must see, my dear Dash, that *your* dog!" and he spread his arms. "I put it to you, frankly: what can be the only effect upon your pupils? How can boys of that age and position in the school be expected to obey or respect a master who cannot even gain firm discipline over his own dog?"

He paused for a reply, but I had none to give. A silence made the room seem overfull. From the doormat outside there came a shrill whine of protest that was sheer relief to me. Baba was still there!

The head master glared towards the door and frowned. "A man," he said, more loudly, as in protest, "who cannot govern his dog will never govern anyone." On which he chewed again.

Baba suddenly struck up his notorious howl. Perhaps he was lonely. He may have wanted to know what was going on. He began scratching vehemently at the painted door. Possibly he was nervous of my safety. I think he never quite liked the head master.

"There!" came the triumphant voice. "What is the brute doing now?"

"He wants to come in," I answered; utterly beyond anything like thought or tact or throwing-in of sirs.

"To come in *here*!" Horror at sacrilege was never so expressed. "Go out and teach it to lie still. No, leave it to me; I'll show you how to train a puppy. Scratching all my paint off. Get away, you brute, you!" Inimitably middle-aged, he lunged a heavy kick at the astonished Baba, who, having but one idea in his skull at a time, dashed for the opening, and in a second was blissfully giving me the welcome earned from a human only after absent years. The head master steamed slowly behind.

"*Don't* encourage the brute, Dash," came the rebukeful voice. "Ah, you thief, you: you would, would you? Tearing the whole house to pieces!" It was only at these words that my galvanised eyes took in the full horror of the scene. Baba had *not* been waiting patiently upon the mat. . . . He had roamed. . . . Whither, I cannot precisely say, for I am not a family man; but either from the nursery or from the wife's recesses he had captured some mystery of clothing, a pink contraption that now sagged from his genial mouth and seemed to raise the lowest human in the soul of the head master. Threatening but inarticulate, he flung his weight at Baba.

That inspired idiot took the whole thing—I blankly foresaw it—as a delicious game. To have a trailing object in one's mouth and to draw it

narrowly from a pursuer's grasp; there is the dog's Elysium. Again and again he dashed around the room; settled in a distant corner; laid the pink frippery upon the floor; yawned and turned from it as if by now altogether bored—but ah, how well I knew that one watchful eye!—then as the head master thundered down in triumph, Baba suddenly bounced back a foot and off he dashed, trailing his loot again from a laughing mouth; squirming himself beneath the low-built sofa, till the tantalised and furious foe retreated snorting; when he was off once more running like one mad, with tail tucked in, round and round the room; then settling, a delusive butterfly; and so the whole Comedy began again. . . . The head master, life-long devotee of discipline and perseverance, refused to be baulked so easily as I had been, I own, a dozen times by these guerrilla tactics. Foiled as to speed, he reverted suddenly to type, and by a delightfully naïve instinct, confronted with such insubordination, strode to a corner by the book-case and took out—*a cane!*

I see now that I did the wrong thing.

I laughed. . . .

At that the head master seemed (I realise the sacrilege of such a phrase) suddenly to see red. He slashed about him wildly, as if swatting flies. Baba was in a delirium of bliss. Never such a game as this! I loved the sloppy creature more in that moment, I think, than ever before: so fatuous, so human. He advanced, retreated, barked, ran, tried a thousand ways of getting pleasure from this kindly playmate. Then, abrupt

as ever, the disaster. A lucky hit got home: a hit with the trained arm's full force. Baba, only a baby after all, dropped his toy with a pathetic yelp, and rushed beneath the sofa—amid a storm of blows. There he turned himself and faced the foe with a cavernal rumbling growl, that I had never heard before. It was so charming that I quite forgot to be angry with the head master. Memories of Fiction tell me now that I ought to have been heroic. I should, at least, have smashed the cane across my knee. But I did nothing, uttered not a word. I am afraid I merely chuckled.

The head master flung his weapon, with dramatic self-satisfaction, on the sofa and turned, crimson from victory, to tackle me. I pay this much tribute to his personality, that I confess I trembled.

At that moment—as he retreated—the inimitable Baba, always a great one at a joke, dashed from his cover, hurled himself on the foe, and bit him on the firm back of his calf.

He bit him, yes: but not hard, honestly not hard. . . . He was only a pup, and there isn't any vice about him. I think, myself, it was only his fun. . . . I told the head master so: but he would not believe me. . . . Possibly I could not get my face quite serious enough.

"Either that dog or you leaves this place today," he thundered, ominously red.

"Or both," I replied, honestly believing, in the moment's heat, that I had been a little brilliant.

It was only when we got out into the Central Path, crowded with boys going to call-over, that

I realised my hound, who must have bulldog in him somewhere, had picked the pink thing up again and still held it sagging from a corner of his triumphant mouth. I did not like to take it from him. He was walking so jauntily, and that hit must have hurt. Besides, it was just as well that he should have scored something, as I lost my job.

I don't know at all how the head master explained to his parents and Governing Body the leaving of a housemaster in the first fortnight of his office; but he did not ask me to stay, and I felt sure, if I made peace with him, that he would poison Baba. So I decided to go and tempt my luck in some other school.

But that somehow never happened. No school wants a master in the second week of term—or, indeed, in any week at all if his last testimonial dates to two years back; and the head master pompously refused to answer all my applications. My family would give me no help beyond some really invaluable advice. They thought I had been very weak to sacrifice my chances for the sake of a dog in even buying which I had been swindled, but it was never too late to be sensible: and so on. . . . One of them cheered me for two days by an obviously laboured period, which I wish I could recall in full. It pointed out, I remember, in the lapidary style, that I must choose between "my prospects and my puppy, my cur and my career."

Otherwise, however, nothing: so when my few pounds went, I "swelled the ranks of the great unemployed," or, in more simple English, sank.

It's curious how quickly a good suit turns to rags if you've nowhere to change it, and the weight of my razor soon seemed to exceed the pleasure that its use could give me. Oh, it's surprising how easy one finds it to sink. . . .

And after all, I wonder if I'm less happy than when I was struggling to rise? Who has ever defined happiness? We get back to where we started—Aristotle! I've no responsibilities; I am free; I never beg; I work for my night's lodging; I sleep well; I feel fit; I have the very best of company. Is there any moral or social duty to succeed? Possibly; but to me it is just a problem to pass away a treeless mile or some brief wayside rest while Baba sleeps.

Oh yes, of course I see that you despise me. . . . You side with the family, with the head master. . . . I should have been firmer with the dog. . . . My whole tragedy strikes you as unnecessary, foolish. . . . I knew it would be so. That, remember, is exactly why I was a little nervous and literary at the start.

Well, it is—as my dear aunt told me—never too late to be sensible. I may still get another job, though it is not easy when once one is down, and I feel that just the same thing would occur again. I don't think that Baba *likes* school life. . . .

Or I might take their advice and lose him. But how *could* I ever lose him? He never leaves my side or heels. He seems to anticipate my movement. I sometimes think that he dictates it. How can anyone fight such fidelity? Or, even, is one intended to?

And besides—what should I do, now, without him? . . .

. . . . .

Towards the end of his story the tramp had seemed to be less talking than thinking to himself, and as his voice now gradually trailed into a silence, he sat perfectly still, staring out moodily before him, the slave of forces proved too strong.

The patience of one of his hearers snapped in two.

"If your damned story is really done, why not get a move on and fetch help? I suppose you're satisfied *now*, Professor?"

Still the tramp made no sound or movement. The Bureaucrat shouted furiously: "Hi! Are you asleep?" But there was no reply. It was the Professor to whom came the idea of genius.

"Baba!" he called. "Baba! good dog! Baba!" and he whistled urgently.

Hearing his name thus mysteriously called, the black mongrel roused itself from sleep and showed every symptom of excitement. Leaping up at his master, he thrust a hintful snout hard into his leg. The tramp started from his reverie, patted the creature's head, and rose with tired obedience, taking up his hedgerow stick. Baba, as they moved off, turned his wonderful yellow eyes wisely and calmly toward the mound and its hidden prisoners; stretched himself luxuriously; kicked scornful dust back from his strong hind legs; and so ambled happily off, close as Fate behind his threadbare master's heels.

END OF PART I

PART II

THE OLD GENTLEMAN

PART II.—THE OLD GENTLEMAN

I

THE town of St. Hilaire possesses, thanks to history, to a tradition of aristocracy, and above all to a gambling concession, an importance and a social finish greater than its size alone would warrant. Its hotels are far above the average for a provincial town; its casino; its race-course; its mediæval town hall; its cathedral and its library-museum, attract thousands of visitors, whose leisure may also be passed in café, opera-house, or music-hall as comfortably and wellnigh as professionally as in Paris itself.

On to the Grande Place face the principal cafés of the town, and among them the Café de la Régence is the acknowledged chief. There—for apéritif, lunch, and liqueur—congregate at midday the notabilities of St. Hilaire; there, until late at night, members of the leading families and the more sprightly of the smart visitors (of whom in spring and summer is no lack) seek music, dancing, laughter, and the more subtle if hazardous pleasures to which, the world over, these diversions so often lead.

At a table on the terrace of the Café de la Régence, shaded by an awning from that same hot sun that a few miles away was driving a solitary tramp to

the shelter of a green and tempting coppice, sat alone a large gentleman of advanced age. He seemed deliberately to bear the stamp of a vanished period, from the grave set of his tall-crowned hat to the vivid discretion of his elastic-sided boots. He wore a loose-fitting suit of buff alpaca and a wide Gladstone collar, above which glowed a round red face, while over it flowed white Dundreary whiskers. His expression—usually benign with the benignity of retired affluence—was at the present moment serious, as befitted a man engaged on important correspondence. A quarto block of finest quality writing paper lay open in front of him; an empty coffee cup and a half-empty glass of cognac stood at his elbow; in his hand was a gold fountain pen. There came an instant when, with something of a flourish, the old gentleman set at the foot of a page covered with fine handwriting a characteristic signature. Then, turning back a number of sheets already closely written, he settled himself in his chair and prepared to give a final reading to his composition.

DEAR GRANDSON JOSEPH (he read),

The requirements of your magazine and of its importunate editor have till now sufficiently spoilt my holiday-making by their insistent presence to satisfy the most exigent member of your young and urgent generation. That I sit down at last to meet them as best I may, is due as much to chance as to my own merit, but perhaps most of all to my good intentions. May ungrateful youth so far forget its traditional heedlessness as to thank

an old man for thus saddening his last years with its absurd requests.

I have come to St. Hilaire from Paris, because I felt unwilling to give up comfort and the spectacle of others' gaiety, but was unable longer to tolerate the glare and dust of a big city. After two days here I am well satisfied with my decision, for this is a charming place—bright but shady, restful but never dull, and above all highly illustrative of the follies and vices of an age that differs less in those respects from its predecessors than you, maybe, would care to admit. I am told that the country round is interesting and beautiful, but before I can properly enjoy excursions or sight-seeing, I must fulfil the rash promise made to you, and send such matter as I can collect for the periodical by which all cultural ills are to be cured.

There are two enclosures to this letter. The first—and this, though uninvited, will likely appeal the more strongly to your taste—came into my hands in a curiously romantic way which, if you are fully to appreciate its nature, I must explain to you.

About a fortnight ago I was dining in the Bois—alone, of course, but for the bitter-sweet memories of forty-five years ago. My table stood a little apart, and from where I sat I could see new-comers as they entered and enjoy the febrile absurdity of the fashionable, aimless throng. The restaurant was very crowded ; indeed, I remember wondering whether, save that opposite to myself, a vacant seat remained in the whole glittering place. I had no fear of intrusion ; the head waiter is a friend of

mine (it is worth his while); but my position gave me that faint twinge of uneasiness that comes from a parcel by one's side on the seat of a crowded train.

For long enough no one had come into the restaurant, until there stepped through the door a solitary girl. That she was English I immediately perceived; equally evident was it that she was not dining alone in a smart café in the Bois for the professional reasons usual in such circumstances. She looked pale and preoccupied; under her arm she carried a book. A well-dressed young Englishwoman who reads at dinner in a fashionable Paris restaurant was, as George would say, "an intriguing proposition." When I saw my friend Achille gesticulating respectfully to the new-comer, I had a sudden impulse of curiosity. I realised that the mysterious girl was being turned away from a full house; I observed her sweep the restaurant with her eyes, pause a moment as she noted the vacant space at my own table, and turn to Achille with a questioning word. He swung round to follow her pointing finger, saw me and hesitated. Almost involuntarily I nodded—slightly, but to so trained an eye unmistakably. Begging the girl to excuse him, he threaded a way between the tables to my side. "Ask the lady to do me the honour of sharing my table," I said. In a few moments she was making a slight bow, prior to seating herself in the vacant place not three feet from my nose.

Beyond a murmured welcome as I returned her bow, I said nothing, merely resuming my seat

and my interrupted dinner. She ordered a meal with strange care, threw back her cloak and prepared—in full evening dress, mind you, bare shoulders, ostrich fan and all—to prop her book against the cruet stand and read as she ate! I am afraid that my interest in this proceeding overbore discretion, for I certainly watched her as she placed the volume conveniently and securely before her. But it was lucky that I so far transgressed against taste, for I observed immediately two interesting things. In the first place she wore a wedding ring; in the second, the book she was reading was your lamentable and provocative novel, good grandson Joseph—the novel about which I had such trouble with your parents.

The sight of the familiar blue cover and of the gilt lettering spelling out across the table—*The Pitiful Wife* (as you know, I have always considered the title the best thing in a bad book)—robbed me of my last reserves of courtesy. I was now thoroughly intrigued with my strange vis-à-vis, and determined to learn something of her history. The chance of conversation was not long in coming. When moving the cruet to make room for her fillet of sole, the waiter clumsily knocked the book on to the floor. I picked it up and, handing it to its owner, said: "The author of that story is my grandson. I disapprove of him and of his book, but I should like to send him news of his foreign circulation. Would it be impertinent to ask your opinion of his work?" I suppose that my extreme age and benevolent aspect reassured her (as it reassures so many of the charming young women I

encounter on my travels), for although she did not smile—indeed, her eyes had a perplexed and child-like misery, as though they had forgotten how to smile—she answered quietly and collectedly that she "had hoped the book would help her, but now thought that she could do it better herself." This extraordinary reply encouraged me to develop the acquaintance. Dinner became a very protracted affair, but by the time I dropped her at her hotel in Paris at 11.30 I knew enough to make me glad that hazard had thrown her in my way. Three days later the history of the lonely novel reader was completed (so far as my—and your—shares in it are concerned) by my receipt of the manuscript, which I now enclose. The theme is strangely similar to that of your unworthy book; the title—as you see—is the same; the treatment—well, to every man his fancy, but you are not the sensible young person I believe you to be if you do not confess that the work of this unknown girl can teach you a good deal more than your novel could ever have taught her. You see, I challenged her to write a version of *fact*, under the title of your *fiction* and in competition with it. She assures me that her story is *what happened to her*—and, when I read it, I believe her word. The very flaunting indifference to all but her own sorrow that enabled her to revisit that restaurant (they went there often, she and her husband, on their honeymoon), to insist on a place being found for her, to read during her meal a book that *might* help her in her trouble, that *must* torture her by the similarity of its narrative to her own experience,

is to my mind proof enough that hers was indeed a case of trouble to the brave.

Read her story; respect her secret. Ignorance of her name will make easier your escape from questioners. I have little doubt that you will wish to publish the tale in your paper. She will not mind; for she remains anonymous and—pitifully enough—the poor child hopes that even her own words in print may "help her" to face a future of loneliness and pain.

So much for the first of my enclosures. The second, although more nearly what you ask for, is less sensational. That is to say, it has no romantic prelude, and its content is suave rather than terrible, belonging as it does to a period of greater complacency and contentment than these nervous, haste-ridden days. You begged me to find among my brother's papers some unpublished story from the real Victorian age. In London I searched in vain. Then I remembered that there were two cases of papers removed to a bank from the Paris flat in which he passed much of his time toward the end of his life. They had been virtually unexamined since his death, it having been established for purposes of probate that no valuables in the accepted sense were among them, the bulk being correspondence and personal litter. I sifted them carefully and found a certain quantity of manuscript, but only one item at all suitable for your purpose. That is the story I now send to you. It bore no title, and I have labelled it—formally enough—*A Victorian Tale.* You will observe with interest the pencil note at the foot

of the last page: "Trollope liked this story and regretted that, when first he read it, he had relinquished control of the *St. Paul's Magazine*, else would he gladly have published it in that periodical." Anthony Trollope was a close friend of your great-uncle's, and the latter would have been pleased to contribute to his paper. But you profit by the chance that made this impossible—if, that is, you like the tale well enough to offer it to your public as a sample of the short-story writing of the past.

There is no more to say. I am glad, as I am tired of writing. Let me know that this packet arrives and your opinion of its contents. If I have failed to achieve the critical standard of a more advanced generation than my own, I am sorry, but you will believe me that what has been done has been done with all the goodwill of

Your affectionate grandfather,

JAMES WITHERSHAW.

The writer of this long epistle was sufficiently satisfied with it next to select and address a foolscap envelope for its reception. He folded his letter carefully and was about to slip it into its cover, when he recalled the very enclosures with which it was concerned. They were in his breast pocket. He looked them over, folded them round the letter to his grandson, inserted them carefully in the envelope and stuck them down. Here, textually, they are:

ENCLOSURE I: THE TALE OF THE SOLITARY ENGLISH GIRL

THE TALE OF THE SOLITARY ENGLISH GIRL

THE PITIFUL WIFE

By STORM JAMESON

"SO good of you to come all this way to see me."

Jane smiled. "I came perhaps twenty miles. You crossed the Atlantic to visit me. Or, at least, that is what you wrote. It is more likely that you came to steal our trade and gathered me in as a make-weight."

The man regarded her with a gently humorous air.

"Don't chatter, darling," he said softly.

Jane's glance faltered. The drawling intimate voice troubled her.

"You chattered two years ago," he went on.

"I found it a poor enough defence," she retorted. "Have you no scruples?"

He laughed outright. "Scruples? My dear, I adore you. Moreover, it was by your own wish that I refrained from conducting my love affair with shameless candour."

The pallor of her small face showed more strangely clear when the flame had burned out in it.

" It was hardly that," she said smoothly.

" Hardly a love affair? Perhaps not. I never had you, but I held you in my arms and kissed you outrageously. I think I had everything of you but the last joys. And those you withheld—for what, my dear? For pity, you said once. And for love of your husband, you said, too. Did you, then, love him when your throat stirred under my mouth and your blood taught your lips a madness they had not known? "

She could smile at him, and she made shift to turn her smile into a low laughter.

" You talk too well, my good David," she said. " Did you bid me here to recall a story two years old? "

She was disturbed and shaken. His indolent grace, which she had forgotten, stirred her afresh, and when he stood up and walked across the room her eyes dwelt on the lithe defiance of his broad body. He was enormous, a swart giant, and adroit in his movements as a wild cat. But she had seen him stand immobile, the grace beaten out of him by the frightful effort that kept him there, rigid, his hands by his sides, his eyes narrow openings through which the violence of his desires had escaped to crush her, melting her bones like wax and pressing on her limbs until they were heavy and powerless as the limbs of a swimmer beaten by the surf. If he had moved, she could have withstood him in nothing. He had neither moved nor touched her, and slowly, dragging out of the surf her swooning body, she had escaped into life.

After that, he had gone, and she had forgotten.

She had thought herself free, but she saw now that she had never been free; she had slept, and the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand in greeting, had been enough to wake her. Ecstasy waited again like wine at her closed lips. She could gulp it down, a madness to consume them both.

The eyelids flickered in her calm face. Looking at her, he saw nothing but her beauty, a serene childlike beauty of quiet eyes and wide fine-pointed mouth.

When he spoke she held herself a little aloof, hoarding her strength. It was easy to talk to him while he stayed at the other side of the room. His voice might thrust into her its intimate sweetness, but let him keep away and he would not know that she was faint for a remembered caress. He would go away—not to come back—and again she would escape from herself and from this violence lurking in her, driving her towards his annihilating desire.

"The story is two years old," he said, "and yet it does not bore you."

"You are so sure of that," she murmured.

"I am not a fool."

He stopped in his even, silent pacing and faced her.

"My dear," he said mildly, "why do you keep me away, torturing both of us? When I left you —two years ago—I did not mean to come back. But you did not let me go. You kept me in your thoughts. They pursued me over half the world.

Does that sound absurd to you? I should have held it absurd—two years ago. But now I know it to be possible. Your thoughts disturbed me. They woke me at night, on ships in strange seas, and when I lay rolled in my blankets under the stars of my own country. If you didn't want me, why didn't you let me go? Why did your thoughts remember me if your body forgot?"

She drew a short quick breath. "I did not know that I had so wanton a mind."

"You talked a deal," he said relentlessly, "of fair dealing for Richard. Is it fair to lie beside your husband and think on another man? Would Richard have thanked you for such fair dealing?"

Her widening eyes held him away. "Richard did not know."

"Do you suppose he never felt the loss? Did you think you could betray him in your thoughts and he not feel the bitterness of that treachery, as I felt its maddening allure? You know better than that. In so far as you let a power go out of you to hold me, you drew away from him, loosening your hold, thrusting him away. Don't you know it?"

Within a foot of her he halted abruptly, his whole will bent on the need to keep himself in that posture of false ease. If he touched her now he would crush her. The force pent up in him for two years would break into an uncontrollable raging. Surely she could hear the effort of his heart that made his breath a sword. He must keep still, while the strength ebbed out of him to

touch her and returned upon him in a monstrous rhythm of joy and pain.

She did not understand. She even touched his arm in a gesture of entreaty. He found himself resenting her foolishness, that asked too much of him.

"Don't do that," he said harshly. "If you touch me, we shall both go up in flames."

She drew back at that, and he saw that she was afraid. The sight of her fear calmed him suddenly. He sat down again, in front of her, and regarded curiously his own firm short hands. They could have crushed her so easily, as easily as they might have caressed her, searching in the curves of her body for the secret of their power over him.

"Are you afraid of me, Jane?" he said softly. "You need not be. I will be gentle with you always. You know it. I could take you now. I have only to touch you, and you would forget all this talk of pity and fair dealing. It would fall into nothing. But you see that I am not touching you. I am leaving you free, because it is your will that must answer me. As your body answers mine."

She was silent still, and he forgot her beauty in a sudden breathless thought of what it would become at his touch.

"It does answer," he repeated gravely. "You know that it does. And since you care like that, why do you withhold yourself? For a word. For a dream."

"For a dream," she said. "Oh, David."

She began to talk with a soft urgency. The

effort of finding words for the emotions that stupefied her, helped, steadying her voice.

"For a dream," she repeated softly. "David, listen. It is indeed because of a dream. No new dream, my David, but one that was born when Richard and I met. We were young. I was eighteen when he married me, six years ago, and he two years older. We were in love: oh, more than that. We were love itself, the sharp sweet love that comes once, and only to youth. Often it dies, but we cherished it and hid it warm in our hearts. We have grown so much into each other that we could not live apart. Richard is my girlhood, my faith in life, my very heart's joy. And I—why, I am in his heart, safe from any hurting thing. Oh, you don't know how safe! You call it a dream, but my life is rooted in it, with his. We shall go through life in its remembered sweetness. Do you think I could let myself spoil that?"

She was flushed and triumphant as if she stood on the far side of those perilous waters.

"You think like that," he said slowly. "And yet you have remembered me for two years. And now—yes, just now—you were mine."

She shook her head. "It is not I who desire you," she said, painfully. "It is something in me, that is fierce and greedy. I do not know what it is nor why your voice and the sight of you should rouse it. But I know that it is not *good*, as the dream is good."

"It is the real you," he said violently. "The other—bemused with dreams—is a girl. I do

not want a girl. I want the woman that you are."

At the touch of his hands she closed her eyes. She made no effort to escape, but swayed against him. Only when he bent his mouth to hers the wide lids opened, and her face blazed with joy made visible.

He hesitated, dazed by the revelation, and in that instant her face changed.

With an adroit movement she slipped out of his arms and stood with hands outstretched to keep him off.

"David, let me go. We shouldn't be happy, you and I. You would want other women, and I should be hurt and hurt you. No—don't deceive yourself and me. You have always wanted other women. You would not keep faith with me."

"You talk as if faith were the only thing in the world." The destroying pain of his body made speech difficult. Again he kept himself still. Above all, he must not frighten her, or she would lose her head, and he would take her and hurt her, made mad by her terror.

"There might be other women," he got out at last. "I do not know. I am a man, like other men. But they would be only women—and you would be my wife. Richard would make that easy for us."

"Ah no——"

The cry that escaped her was his complete answer, but he dared not accept it.

"Jane," he said. "My love, look at me. Do

not fail me—and yourself—now. I can give you more than a faithful body, more than a dream. I can give you a joy you never imagined, and the madness of life filled to the brim with living. Oh, you might be hurt, you might suffer, but at least you would be alive. You know that I love you. I shall love you until I die. I should not love them—the others. No man can love two women at one time, though men have deluded themselves with that romantic notion. What one gets is stolen from t'other. I should give nothing to my women: I should not even lie to you about them."

There was one wide step between them, and he took it. He felt her body flutter in his grasp. Her beauty filled him to the throat, so that he shuddered a little, unconscious that he held her with fierce hands that hurt. "Jane! Oh, my God, Jane! If you won't come to me, give me one night, one day and night out of a lifetime, your life and mine."

He saw her face then, and let her go. She stood with hands at her throat.

"There is no one night for you and me," she said. He bent his head to catch the words. "It is nothing—or all. I must go. I was mad to come." Her dilated eyes did not falter before the flame of his. "There will be no thoughts, this time, to draw you across the world. I have got my freedom of you. Take yours of me."

She had to wait for his answer.

"And if there were, I should not come again," he said steadily. "There is a point beyond which

passion ceases to endure—a man's passion, at any rate. You have pushed me to that point. I could not take you now."

Jane hurried through the streets. She wanted swift movement to outstrip the scattering fury of her thoughts. When she reached her sister's house, she was glad to step from the sunlight into the vast quiet room. Virginia was curled up on a couch. She lifted her pointed face and regarded Jane curiously.

"Well?" she said. Her wide eyes mocked Jane's gravity.

Jane laughed, and made no other answer.

"I suppose you have sent him away," Virginia observed. "You are a fool. He is worth ten of Richard."

Jane laughed again, softly. "David goes to my head," she murmured. "But only when he is with me. He will not trouble my thoughts. *That* fire is burned out."

She was sorry for Virginia, whose husband bored her, as who would not be bored with that flat face and solemn in dignity of paunch? Jane remembered Richard's smooth youth, and pity for Virginia rose to her lips as she touched them to Virginia's cheek.

Virginia sat up. "You are a fool," she repeated softly. "But you are a dear fool. I will kill Richard if he hurts you."

"Richard will not hurt me in anything that matters."

Her happiness, naked and unashamed on her radiant face, woke the other's malice.

"I think you are too sure and too careful of Richard," she said, deliberately. "Men do not like to have their faithfulness taken for granted: neither do they like to be petted and mothered overmuch. Their vanity suffers, and they sometimes take odd means to discover whether their faithfulness is indeed appreciated."

"You are bitter, my Virginia."

"I am awake. Men are mean. Oh, women are mean too, but in other ways. Men have a nostalgia for the gutter, and most of them contrive to indulge it, at one time or another."

"Oh," Jane said.

She did not say, "Not Richard," because she would not expose herself to Virginia's scorn, but her flickering smile betrayed her.

"Did you tell Richard why you were coming up to town?" her sister asked cruelly.

Jane flushed.

"No," she murmured. "But I shall tell him. It will be easy enough, now that it is over." She added defiantly: "There was nothing to tell."

David was right. Her thoughts, of which she had been hardly aware, were a treachery. Richard had felt it. She recalled days and moods when she had not been able to touch him; in some fashion he had withdrawn from her. It was the subtlest of constraints, but it had existed, coming and going. Simple now, and very sweet, to wave it aside. She would cry a little, and implore Richard, "Do you indeed love me?"—and he would comfort her, looking at her with candid eyes that shamed her duplicity.

As the afternoon wore on, she grew restless and impatient. The madness that David had stirred swept through her when she thought of her husband. With a deliberate pleasure she called up the image of herself lying in her bed, Richard's arms flung round her and desire coming down upon them like a wild thing. She shivered, and her breath faltered in her throat.

She sought Virginia, standing before her with subdued defiance. "Virginia," she said. "I think I'd like to go home now, rather than wait till to-morrow."

Virginia hid her smile. "But I was coming back with you," she observed. "Do I follow you?"

"No, come with me now," Jane said.

She had happiness enough to spare its crumbs for Virginia. Her joy in Richard would be the sharper that she must hide it from Virginia's cool eyes. When at last they were alone, he would take her with the boyish mischievous smile that died swiftly as his mouth shut on hers and his eyes looked down at her in a grave absorption.

In the train she dreamed, her hand hiding her face from Virginia's candid mockery. Her happiness grew until she could scarcely breathe. It swelled in her throat, a secret painful ecstasy. The years of marriage dropped away, and she was that girl who had gone gallantly, head up, to her young lover. She recalled the ways of that eager boy. He had liked to lie beside her in the long grass of the walled orchard. He said that it made him one with all the gay company of lovers who had enjoyed

their ladies in the star-pricked darkness, praying the night to be tardy that gave them soft lips, cool hands, and a tender body for benison.

Jane shut her lips on the joyous laughter that rose to them.

When they reached the little station the chauffeur said that Richard was away, and she stood still in the shock of disappointment. An abrupt consciousness of Virginia's sympathy steadied her to ask when he had gone. "Yesterday," the man told her. "I drove him to catch the down train, an hour after you left."

At that, violent relief mastered her. He had not followed her to London. During the short drive, she abandoned herself to a shamed unhappiness. The depth of her treachery frightened her.

"I wanted to tell him about David, to-night," she said suddenly.

Virginia shrugged. "You are like the rest of us, my dear, for all your quaint simplicity. You revel in painful scenes."

But Virginia herself was pleased when Richard's wire commanded his car for the last train. She watched Jane with eyes that had forgotten their unhappy malice. Once she sighed, and said, sharply, "Don't flaunt your joy in my face, Jane. You're hardly decent." But she smiled at her own words and came lazily to kiss the restless girl.

Jane wandered from her room to Richard's. She stood for a moment beside his bed, and then, opening a drawer, began foolishly to rearrange it. Richard hated to see her about his things, so that she indulged stealthily her need to do for him

small personal services that no other woman might do.

When she came upon three letters tucked underneath a pile of garments she looked at them with puzzled interest, fingering them vaguely. Abruptly, a dizzy excitement thrust into her. Why was Richard keeping letters in that place? She smoothed out the sheets with a hand that shook, and as she read she grew very cold and a sick pain filled her so that she shivered, swaying against the wall. The words of the letters became a meaningless chaos, from which phrases rose and stabbed her afresh: "Dearest, you know that I want you always when you come." And another: "I do understand that you love your wife, and I feel no jealousy of her. She is more beautiful than I am, and clever, and of your class, but I think I give you something that she does not—a madness, perhaps, that you had not imagined." And farther down the page, words that stirred the dull pain to an agony. The blood drove through her so that she could neither see nor hear. She thought that she cried out, but no sound came between her tortured lips.

"It was very wonderful to lie beside you in the orchard. When I am lonely I recall your face, so pale and grave in that cool dusk. But it is too dangerous. Do not make me come there again."

There was nothing left then, nothing. All had been taken from her, to the last secret things. She stood naked, cowering under the lash of his hidden thoughts. It was she who had come naked

before his mistress. Her intimate life had been opened to that curious gaze.

She was sick with shame, sick and reeling in a desolation more frightful than anything she had conceived.

He had done this to her, the grave tender boy whose body she had worshipped. She was beaten to the ground, humbled as none else could have so humbled her.

"Is it pride, then, that hurts like this?" Her lips parted in difficult speech.

"If it is pride, I am dying of it," she cried terribly.

Virginia's light step sounded outside the room, and Virginia's voice rose above the pain that blew round and through her like a wind. She gasped, and it snatched the breath from her mouth.

Virginia knocked. Jane pushed the letters into the drawer and walked across the room. "Come in," she said.

Virginia came in. Her glance flickered over Jane's face. It was white and remote and the eyes were empty. "Something has happened to her," she thought, and her heart failed.

Jane's voice was level. "What did you want?" she asked.

Virginia lost her head at that thin sound. She tried to take Jane's hand, but the girl showed a quiet resentment.

"I've forgotten," Virginia stammered. "There was something I wanted."

"I'll come down with you," Jane said calmly.

They walked towards the door. Virginia,

miserably conscious of her blunder, went quickly. At the door she turned. Jane was standing motionless in the middle of the room, her hands held stiffly by her side and her head flung back. She looked as if she were dying for want of air. A strange rasping sound broke through her, tearing its way through her straining body. For a moment after Virginia reached her, she kept herself in that rigid vacancy, and then cry followed harsh cry, choking up through the lifted throat. Virginia held her, taking the violent shudderings against herself, touching the blind senseless thing with useless fingers. The sleeves of Jane's thin gown clung to her arms, wet with the sweat of anguish. Desperate and quiet, Virginia waited for minute after minute.

At last Jane lay still and spent in her sister's arms. Virginia spoke softly. "Oh, don't, my dear, don't. It's not worth it. Men are all like that."

"You knew?"

"As soon as I saw you."

Jane drew back from the edge of that pity.

"You should not have been here," she said. "It makes things harder. Will you go now?"

When Virginia had gone, Jane opened the drawer and stood with the letters in her hand. Thoughts came and went, emptying their bitterness into her. He had crept from bed to bed, coming from the other woman's body to press himself to hers. So he would have come to her to-night. She would have spread her joy before his eyes that had but just looked on the other's joy of lifted face and

shaken limbs. She covered her face, groaning in the travail of her shame.

She was that poorest thing, the wife deceived. Jests were made of her. Songs were sung of her. She was mocked and held for the laughter of fools.

Richard would be sorry for her wretchedness.

How should she tell him then? Her eyes sought the letter. "It was wonderful to lie beside you in the orchard."

"Your love-making lacks originality," she would say, and laugh a little, holding out the fatal page. Desolation swept down upon her at the sound of her voice repeating the malicious words.

She had not caught the sounds of his arrival, but she heard his footsteps now in the corridor. He stood in the doorway, and her eyes turned aside, seeing even in that ebb of her forces the charm of his faun's mouth and wide lifted brow. Her lips moved soundlessly in the phrases she had prepared, but from her dry throat came only a cracked murmur. "It is all spoiled," she said, and fell into hopeless weeping, while he stood looking from her face to the letter in her hand.

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ENCLOSURE II.—The story found among the papers of the late Mark Withershaw, the well-known novelist of the seventies, and entitled by his brother—James Withershaw—

A VICTORIAN TALE

A VICTORIAN TALE

By MICHAEL SADLEIR

IN his little study with its view over grey-green grass to the scattered tombstones of the churchyard the old vicar listened in silence to the pleading of his wife.

"Very well," he said at last, "I will ask her. But she will not like it. She would prefer me to go away altogether."

"John," replied his wife gently, "you will never admit your qualities. She is a hard woman and proud, but she loves you as well as any in the parish. Dr. Wells has said you must have three months' rest. Three months! Surely that is not much to ask?"

He smiled and patted the softly wrinkled hand that lay upon his knee.

"Dear Mary! I am nothing to her beyond a fixed element in Windlesham. Because I have been here years, she likes me, but any other would do as well. If I retire, she will resent the change, but settle down soon enough to a new permanence. If, however, I suggest a substitute for three months —— ! You know how she is, even with temporary tenants on the estate——"

Mrs. Headicar sighed.

" I will go instead of you," she suggested.

But he shook his head and, rising wearily from his chair, looked about for coat and hat.

" No, no. I will ask. She can but say no."

. . . . .

Behind the high windows of the castle morning-room two ladies sat over their breakfast.

" The vicar has asked to see me at ten o'clock," said the elder.

" What about, mother ? "

" I have no idea. Some new misbehaviour among the mill-hands, I expect. They are a troublesome lot. Windlesham was happier without them."

Conversation lapsed. Then the younger woman leant forward and touched with her fingers a white rose which shone against the black satin of her mother's dress.

" Why so smart, mother ? You do not wear flowers as a rule."

" It is Agatha's birthday," replied the old lady simply.

Her daughter flushed with embarrassment.

" How stupid of me ! Forgive me, darling ! "

Quickly she rose and, passing behind her mother's chair, laid her cheek on the carefully waved white hair.

" Forgive me," she murmured again.

The old lady patted brusquely the hand that caressed her shoulder.

" There is no question of forgiveness, Sally. I do not expect others to remember. Perhaps I should do better to forget myself."

Her voice was steady and her eyes were veiled, as always, by the mesh of her proud reserve. Without another word she left the table and walked quickly from the room.

. . . . .

The Reverend John Headicar made his way slowly up the street toward the castle gates. To the remote township of Windlesham he had given the best years of his life, tending the souls of its people according to the simple recipes of his faith. At first his parishioners had been mainly farmers and farm labourers. Then the old stone mill by the river had been restarted, and John Headicar had found fresh scope for charity and patience among a new and more turbulent population attracted to the place by the demand for industrial labour. Once again devotion and the radiance of a guileless mind had won for him respect and affection. The vicar was beloved by his parishioners for the unselfish, unassuming man he was, and, if the rougher of the young men and the shriller of the mill girls were seldom seen at church, they and theirs were little less cordial in welcoming the grey-haired clergyman to their crowded homes than were those who formed regular part of his congregation.

Had Windlesham consisted merely of schoolmaster and doctor, of a handful of small bourgeois and farmers, of labourers and their families, of the more recent colony of mill workers, John Headicar's life work might more openly have shown the fullness of achievement; would in any event have proved less laborious in the performance. But

there was another element beside the inhabitants of the tiny town and of the scattered farmhouses in its neighbourhood. On the rising slope to eastward stood the castle, its great gates dominating the main street, its flat many-windowed façade so set along the grey flank of the down as to catch the glow of the setting sun and blazon forth in letters of flame the agelong motto of feudal lordship. Every blade of grass, every mossgrown tile in Windlesham belonged to the castle, and the castle itself belonged to one who allowed neither herself nor her dependents to forget the power and privilege of possession.

Eglantine, Dowager Marchioness of Rhianver, was in her own right Countess of Windlesham. When her husband died and the marquisate with all its Welsh revenues passed to a third cousin, Lady Rhianver established herself in her own castle of Windlesham and shut out from her new life all memory of the old.

It had meant little of happiness, that old life, for her husband had been for years before his death partially paralysed, her only son had died in infancy, and of her two daughters one was lost to her. Wherefore she came gladly enough to her own place, there, in the dignified seclusion suited to her unbending nature, to live out the loneliness that fate had decreed for her. For fifteen years, solitary, unloved, her isolation broken by occasional visits from her married daughter, she had ruled over Windlesham. Maybe the benefits of her dominance outweighed the gall of her despotism. Certain it is, however, that

her insistent presence made doubly difficult the life work of John Headicar, who was compelled to render to feudalism the things that were feudal, and at the same time, in the lives of those about him, to remedy as best he might the evils of its ruthlessness.

But now at long last the toil of mediation had worn him out and, with the nervous misery of the unselfish man forced to beg on his own behalf, he rang at the porticoed front door and sought admittance, by appointment, to the presence of his patroness.

She rose to greet him, an upright figure, clothed richly but simply in black, her white hair dressed high on her unbending head, a single white rose pinned to the bosom of her gown.

" Good morning, Mr. Headicar. You wish to ask me something ? "

Still standing, he began in a low voice to tell of his unfitness for continued work.

" I am ashamed," he concluded, " to confess my feebleness. But I am convinced that at present I am not doing my duty as it needs to be done."

While he was speaking she had made no movement, nor had word nor sound of sympathy escaped her. As he fell silent, she seated herself and looked him keenly in the face.

" I am sorry," she said formally, " that you are unwell. You wish to resign the parish altogether ? "

He faltered a little.

" Well—personally—it had been my first idea —but my wife, Lady Rhianver—in fact we should

both feel it very grievous to leave Windlesham. Dr. Wells says three or six months away would set me up. Perhaps you would consider a locum tenens. . . ."

She frowned.

"You know I dislike temporary arrangements," she said coldly. "Such a plan would mean that for three or six months the place would virtually be uncared for. I could not trust a locum tenens, and it would not be worth while to instruct him."

With a sigh the vicar drew himself up.

"Then I suppose I shall have to ask leave to resign," he said. "I will write you a formal letter."

And he turned to go.

"Wait a moment. It is a little sudden, Mr. Headicar. You have been here so many years that I cannot in a minute visualise the place without you. How is a locum tenens found? I understand the bishop can be asked for someone special, but, failing that, his lordship will select the man who most conveniently occurs to him. I know of no one I could ask to come. Am I to allow some stranger, chosen by hazard, to take charge of Windlesham for half a year? It is out of the question, Mr. Headicar. You must see that it is out of the question."

"I had no idea of making such a proposal," he replied, warmly. "I know your care for the people and I know my own love for them. No substitute must come to Windlesham of whom we know nothing."

"Then you have someone in mind?"

"As it happens—yes. My old friend, the vicar of St. Catherine's, North Kensington, wrote to me not long ago about one of his curates. He said that in this young man the spirit of our Lord was indeed wonderfully strong, so that even among the worst characters of the parish (and it is a very rough place) he is venerated as a saint. But the boy is ill with overwork. He spends his time in fetid air and will not care for his own comfort or well-being. He must be got away for a while. My friend told me much about this young man—something of his parentage and the strange circumstances of his taking orders—and last night the idea came to me that if your ladyship would consent to his coming here, the change might not only save a very noble life, but bring to Windlesham qualities of Christian endeavour that I cannot claim to possess."

"This young man—does he want to go permanently to a country parish?"

Mr. Headicar smiled a little sadly.

"Did he so desire, I hope that I should not hesitate in making way for him. But he is wedded to London—will only leave it for a few months, and that under compulsion."

For a while the marchioness sat silent. She was now gazing away from him through the tall window to the right.

"All this makes a difference," she said at last. "Tell me about this wonderful young man."

"His name," began the vicar, "is Alfred Bostock——"

Lady Rhianver turned her head sharply.

"What name?"

John Headicar noted with surprise the sudden curiosity of his listener. He repeated what he had said. The marchioness turned away again with an absent nod of the head.

"Ah yes—I did not hear. Go on."

"He came one day on foot to Clandon—the big theological college near Colchester—and begged to see the Warden. He explained that he had tramped from London because he wished to become a priest, that life in a poor quarter had proved to him——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted the old lady. "Tell me that afterwards. Did he say who he was, where he came from?"

"He is the son," replied the vicar, "of some actor or teacher of elocution. The father seems to have been a bad lot——"

Lady Rhianver had risen suddenly to her feet.

"Are his parents dead?" she asked, with a quietness more emotional than any ferocity.

"I—I do not know," said John Headicar. "I believe the father is, but—I could find out if your ladyship——"

"No matter." She walked away from him and stood for a moment by the fireplace, looking down into the flaming coals. There was a pause. Then:

"I am interested in what you tell me, Mr. Headicar," she said. "I will agree to this Mr.—this young man coming here while you are away. Please arrange it quickly. Good morning."

He bowed, embarrassed and astonished at the

spasmodic abruptness of one customarily so controlled. As he was leaving the room, she called to him.

"Mr. Headicar, you will regard the payment of your substitute as my affair. The income from the parish will be yours entirely, as in normal circumstances. No need to thank me"—as he gestured appreciation. "We all owe to you and to your wife the little we can repay. Good morning again."

In something of a daze the vicar made his way home, to tell Mrs. Headicar of his strange interview and to borrow of his old friend by letter a curate as locum tenens.

. . . . .

It was a quarter of an hour after the vicar had left the castle that Lady Rhianver's married daughter came in search of her mother. She found the marchioness seated in an arm-chair by the window of the small library, her fingers playing idly with a paper knife, her features frozen into a mask of reverie. When her daughter spoke, she turned her head composedly and began immediately to speak in a voice of cold monotony.

"Something very strange has happened," she said. And she related what had passed between herself and the vicar. "One would hardly believe it possible," she concluded. "After all these years. . . ."

"But, mother dear, it can only be a coincidence. Do not form hopes that cannot be fulfilled. The name is not so uncommon. . . ."

"I am quite sure," replied the old lady calmly.

"There cannot be two Bostocks that were actors and teachers of acting. I refuse to believe there can be two. And now that horrible man is dead—the man that bewitched my Agatha—and—and—Oh, Sally!" she burst out, and the sudden emphasis after her quiet indifference gave to her voice a strident quality that wrung the heart of her hearer, "Sally, don't you realise that this is Agatha's son. The young clergyman is coming to his grandmother? At last—at last—the gap in my heart is to be filled!"

"Dear, dear mother, calm yourself! With all my heart I pray you may be right. But you will harm yourself by this excitement. Listen, I will go to London to-day and find this young man. I will find out all about him, and if it is as you believe I will come back with him at once. If not—well, then, I must try to comfort you as best I may."

"No, no!" cried the old lady. "No one must see him before I do. He is my boy! He is my darling's child! Besides——" with a sudden drop to uncanny whispering—"besides, he may tell *me* where his mother is, and he would not tell that to a stranger. His mother is probably alive. Agatha is alive! Alive . . . alive!"

In a paroxysm of hysterical delight she threw back her head and lay, shaking with dreadful laughter, in her chair by the high library window.

Her daughter and the servants got her to bed. The doctor was sent for, but by the time he reached the castle Lady Rhianver was her usual calm self

again and resentfully defiant of enforced convalescence.

Next day a telegram from Dorset summoned home the marchioness's visitor. No further mention was made of the suggested journey to London.

"Good-bye, Sally," said the mother. "Thank you for coming, and let me know how matters are at home. I am quite well again now. You shall hear about Alfred when he comes."

. . . . .

Alfred Bostock was nearing the end of his first evening sermon in Windlesham Church. He had only arrived the day before, and it was with real curiosity that, on this occasion as already at morning service, he scanned the faces of his new congregation. How they differed from those to whom he was accustomed! How unquestioning and simple and healthy they looked in contrast to the wizened pallor and ill-thriven cunning of the men and women of the slum parish of St. Catherine's. One by one he studied them, as, from his heart and speaking without notes, he told them something of the life and struggle of great cities. Pew by pew he conducted his examination, appraising and judging each face, the while with simple eloquence he told of what he knew so well. It was, by the hazard of his chosen progression, only a few moments before the end of his sermon that he reached in his survey of the church the south transept that lay across the chancel to his left. He saw a grille of heavily carved oak balusters, behind which, in the dim light of a single lamp,

a solitary figure could be seen, black-veiled and motionless.

"And now to God the Father . . ." With bowed head and body turned to the altar he waited for the scraping of feet and shuffle of hymn books to sink into silence.

By the time the service was over all memory had left him of the sombre richness of the private pew, of the lonely dignity of that unyielding figure. Wherefore he was greatly amazed to receive in the vestry a visit from a liveried groom. The man touched his hat.

"Beg pardon, sir. Her ladyship would wish to speak to you."

Bostock smiled inquiry. "Her ladyship? I am ready now. Will she come in?"

"Her ladyship is in her carriage and begs you to speak to her there."

"Then you must wait a moment for me to put my things away and lock up the church. Please tell her ladyship I will be with her in two minutes."

Hat in hand he stood at the open door of a small brougham that waited at the churchyard gate. From the blackness of the interior came a woman's voice.

"Get in, Mr. Bostock. I want you to dine with me this evening."

The note of command was unmistakable. Murmuring thanks, he climbed into the brougham. The door was closed from without and he was carried smoothly into the night. Not a word was spoken. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he could make out the dim outline of his

companion. Clearly the figure was the same as that behind the grille in the south transept. "This is the chatelaine," he said to himself, and was on the whole content thus early to become acquainted with one who was perforce a power in Windlesham.

Arrived at the castle, he saw little of his hostess but her cloak, as, muffled to the eyes, she passed up the steps and hurried across the hall. The butler relieved him of coat and hat; conducted him to hot water, soap, and towels, and, toilet completed, led him to the long drawing-room, in which a fire burnt gloriously.

"Her ladyship will be down directly, sir."

Glad of a moment's respite, Alfred Bostock looked about him. The room was tall with sumptuous panelling and a ceiling heavily ornate with garlands and other plaster-work. The white painted walls rose from flooring polished to brilliance, upon which fine and sombre rugs lay in orderly profusion. The furniture was for the most part in mahogany, carved and polished, but a few satinwood chairs and two card-tables, inlaid and painted, shone like old amber among their darker fellows.

There was a rustle of silk, and a tall old lady, with white hair and eyes aloof but courteous, came forward to greet him.

"You will forgive my unceremonious invitation, Mr. Bostock. I am Lady Rhianver and, as Windlesham is my home, I was anxious to make the acquaintance of our new clergyman."

As she spoke her eyes never left his face. They

were inexpressive eyes, but behind their bleakness he felt the power of veiled but searching scrutiny. At dinner, with the easy candour of one whose soul is clear, he talked of London and his work. His hostess responded graciously.

The meal passed with good humour and content. It was when the servants had left the drawing-room, after handing coffee, that she refused for the first time to follow his lead in conversation. He was venturing an opinion on denominational effort in poor parishes, but she cut him short.

"Listen to me," she said suddenly. "Your father was an actor, was he not?"

Rather surprised, the young man nodded.

"At one time, yes. But he got little enough to do, and returned to his old employment of teaching elocution and training amateurs."

"His name was Alexander?"

"Yes."

"He was tall and red-haired?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a man was he?"

"A very handsome man—until—— No, he was a good-looking man."

"Was he a *good* man?"

"You will pardon me, Lady Rhianver, but I cannot abuse my father. I am sure that on many of the occasions that he went astray the fault was not so much his as that of others."

"And your—mother?"

There was a break in the voice as this question was asked. Bostock noticed signs of growing agitation in his hostess. Eager to find some means

of changing the subject of conversation, he did not at once reply.

"Your mother?" came the query, sharply, impatiently repeated.

"I am even less desirous of discussing my mother, Lady Rhianver," he replied in a low voice.

"Why? Why 'even less'?" Her impatience crumbled into wistfulness. "I am not quite myself. You must forgive a tired old woman—her—impertinence. Tell me just this—is she alive?"

He nodded.

"Where——" She checked herself and after a struggle mastered her agitation. "I should like to see her." She spoke now with something approaching her usual calm grandeur. "Please write to her to come here."

He sat silent, uneasy and amazed.

"Well? You will do this, Mr. Bostock, because I ask you. I am accustomed to have my way in Windlesham, and it is a small thing to ask a man to invite his mother on a visit. Promise me you will do this!"

Rising, he looked her in the face.

"I do not understand, Lady Rhianver. You are cruel, but I think you do not know it. Also I feel that your mind is tortured in this matter, although I know not how or why. Can you give me a reason that I should ask my mother to come here?"

She walked toward the door, speaking as she walked, but without turn or motion of the head.

"Do as I ask and you shall have reason and to

spare. I am not well and must leave you now. Andrews will show you where to smoke and bring all you ask for, if you care to sit awhile." An idea seemed to strike her. She stood at the door and faced him—" Yes—you shall stay and write from here to bid your mother come, on notepaper that Andrews will fetch you. That will be a good plan. Good night, Mr. Bostock."

Alone in the shining spaces of the drawing-room, the young man stood and pondered, until pity for her lonely pride conquered his dislike.

" So be it," he said to himself. " I will do as she asks."

. . . . .

A small boy brought a note to the castle and waited for an answer.

" DEAR LADY RHIANVER,
" My mother arrives this afternoon.
" Yours very truly,
" ALFRED BOSTOCK."

The answer read as tersely :

" DEAR MR. BOSTOCK,
" I expect you both at six o'clock.
" EGLANTINE RHIANVER."

. . . . .

The marchioness was never more wilful. Tea must be ready in the long saloon at six. No—she would take her tea alone upstairs at five. No again—the visitors must be shown to the small drawing-room and she would send down to Mrs.

Bostock to come upstairs. No once more—better to see the young man first. No finally—let matters arrange themselves; she would give orders later.

The servants, tired with answering impatient bells, shrugged shoulders wearily. "Bit off this afternoon," remarked the younger footman. Andrews frowned reprovingly.

"Her ladyship is frequently a little difficult," he said.

At last the deep clang of the front door bell sounded down the flagged passages of the servants' quarter. Straightening his coat, the butler sailed impressively across the hall.

Before he could reach the door his mistress, calling sharply from the bend of the great staircase, fetched him back.

"Andrews," she said, "you will show Mr. and Mrs. Bostock to the long drawing-room. You will then ask the lady to forgive me for five minutes and bring Mr. Bostock to my own room."

"Very good, my lady."

"When I ring, bring Mrs. Bostock upstairs at once. At *once*—do you understand?"

"Very good, my lady."

. . . . . .

Alfred Bostock closed the door behind him and stood awaiting explanation of his hostess's strange summons.

"You asked to see me, Lady Rhianver. . . ."

She hurried to greet him, took his two hands in hers and gazed earnestly in his face.

"Yes—I wished to see you—alone. In a moment I will see—your mother. But I have

something to tell you, something that will make clear why I have behaved thus oddly. There——! Sit down. You must doubt my sanity?"

The young man, more mystified than ever, murmured a formal negative. Nevertheless, seated uncomfortably on an upright chair, he asked himself to what this seeming lunacy was tending. The marchioness began to speak.

"Listen to me, boy. I am going to tell you a story. Long ago I had two daughters. One I still have, and she is dear to me. The other I have lost, and her I loved more than the world. She was dark and slim and mischievous, and her spirit was the high untamable spirit of the stock from which she had sprung. I spoiled her. After I had lost her, I came to see that I had spoiled her, to see that the sorrow that came upon me was of my own making. It was in London first that she took a craze for acting. You are too young to realise how exceptional and shocking it was then thought for girls of noble family to mix with actors and actresses. You must believe me when I tell you that only a mother madly fond would have countenanced what I countenanced in Agatha. She had the idea of producing a play in Wales—(my husband was alive in those days, and we spent some part of the year in Plas Colyn)—with a professional instructor and a few professional performers. Like the fool I was, I smiled and let her go her way. She collected her friends and chose her play and invited those of the expert theatrical world that it pleased her to invite. They came to Wales and set eagerly to work. The

stage manager was your father—do not interrupt me! I must tell my story to the end—and, as you once said yourself, he was in those days a very handsome man. You can guess the rest? How far the intimacy had gone in London I do not know. Certainly he and Agatha were not strangers when the last Welsh phase began. He bewitched her—bewitched her, boy—and—when the play was over——"

Alfred Bostock started to his feet. The old lady, a hand to her throat, seemed in danger of choking. She was pale as death and reeled against the table. With his arm he supported her.

"Please, Lady Rhianver, I beg of you not to tell me this. My mother——"

The words rallied her distracted senses. A gleam of triumph shone in her tired eyes. With a sudden movement she escaped his arm and moved steadily to the fireplace. He saw her jerk the bell-rope, heard the bell's voice sound distantly. Then she turned and began to speak rapidly:

"I am better. We have only a few moments now, and I must finish my tale quickly. Agatha ran away with this man—with your father—leaving a note to say they were to marry, that she could not hope for my forgiveness or for her father's, but she loved him well enough to give up home and friends and all the joys and power of her position, to be his wife and look after him and share his work. According to the standards of those days she had done an unforgivable thing. She had betrayed her caste and tarnished her father's

name. He swore that to him for ever she was dead. He forbade my searching for her, even trying to get news of her. But secretly I disobeyed. I searched and advertised and searched again, but all in vain. She had disappeared. And then this amazing chance of your acquaintance! Now you understand? Now you realise that I am not mad, save with delight at seeing you, who are my grandson, and your mother—who—is——"

She stopped abruptly as the door latch rattled and the door swung slowly open.

"My Agatha!" cried the old lady, and tottered forward.

In the doorway stood a short stout woman, her face lined beneath its powder, her hair, sourly yellow, piled to either side of a gaudy hat. With mouth open in amazement she stared at the tall, black-gowned figure that swayed uncertainly in the centre of the room. Behind her stupefaction the door closed silently.

For a second the marchioness stood as though rooted to the ground, her body reeling slightly, her arms stretched stupidly toward the newcomer. Then she turned to Alfred Bostock.

"But—this is not——"

He moved to support her to a chair, but at his touch she shrank away.

"How dare you!" she broke out in fury. "How dare you bring that creature here! Where is my child? Where is Agatha?"

"Lady Rhianver," he cried, imploringly. "I swear to you this is my mother. Of the story you have told me I know nothing. I tried to

say so, but you prevented me. It is all a horrible confusion. Let us go and never trouble you again."

The woman who had gazed from one to the other, tongue-tied with genuine astonishment, now regained the ready impudence of her class.

"What the hell *is* all this?" she demanded. "Alfred, if you've brought me here to make a fool of me, I'll let you know it. As for the old lady—who does she want anyway, with her 'Agathas' and her hoity-toity tempers."

Lady Rhianver had groped her way to a chair and now sat, pitifully quiet, under the strident emphasis of the other's indignation. Before Alfred Bostock could reply, she raised her hand to bid him be silent.

"One moment," she said dully. "I should like to ask Mrs. Bostock a question, and also to apologise to her for the very painful scene in which, by my own folly, I have involved her. First of all, madam, the apology. Will you show me the courtesy so far to overlook what has occurred as to allow me to ask you something?"

The visitor threw up her head and then allowed it to settle pompously into the cheap furs that hung about her shoulders.

"A civil question deserves a civil answer, I suppose," she observed, "though I may say I don't fancy being made a fool of. I'm for toddling out of this, sharp as may be, so we'll have the query here and now, if you *don't* mind. Whether I answer or not depends, of course."

"I will not waste time," said the marchioness,

coldly, " and I will try not to be too personal. I used to know your husband, Mrs. Bostock. Perhaps you would not mind telling me how long ago you were married to him ? "

" How long ? Good Lord, since the Flood ! Must be thirty years ago if it's a day. I was married at sixteen, you know. And I'm older than I look. Which is a marvel, you know, when you come to think what I've been through. No joke, marrying Alec Bostock, you can take it from me."

" Thirty years ? " repeated Lady Rhianver in a voice so low that it was almost a whisper. " Thirty years. . . . Two more questions—if I may. Did your husband—was he—were there ever—other women——? "

" Ah ! " the widow raised her hands in mock dismay. " *Others ?* You bet your life ! Faithfulness wasn't Alec's strong suit. Not that I minded much after some years. You get used to anything, don't you ? Still, I'm glad Alfred's a good boy."

With a supreme effort the marchioness brought herself to a final probing of her own agony.

" I have done," she interrupted, " in one moment I have done. Did you ever hear tell of a Lady Agatha Grant-Charteris ?—that is to say—among the women he—had to do with——"

Mrs. Bostock drew down the corners of her mouth in an effort of memory.

" Grant-Charteris ? " she repeated. " I seem to know the name. I believe—oh yes "—with the sudden indifference of one who recalls a trivial

and long-finished incident—" I know. She was the swell who froze on to him once. I heard him mention her once or twice. Liked to feel he was good enough for society folk, you know. But he got rid of her after a couple of weeks or so. Too damned stuck up, he used to say. It wasn't one of his important affairs, not by any means—— Good Lord ! Alfred, she's fainted ! "

. . . . .

The tight boots of Alexander Bostock's only widow tapped nervously across the marble paving of the hall. On the floor of her boudoir the mother of one of Alexander Bostock's many mistresses—and not one of his important ones, not by any means—lay dying.

THE OLD GENTLEMAN

II

MR. WITHERSHAW, his letter sealed and addressed, paid for his coffee-cognac and strolled comfortably across the square to the post-office. He was waiting at the registration counter for his official receipt, when the swing-door wheezed open and snapped to behind one of those young women that only France and Vienna can produce. Technically she was not beautiful, but by allurement of clothing and by discreet but deliberate suggestion of bodily grace, she drew the eye of every man in the hot, sleepy post-office of St. Hilaire. Even the jaded clerks in their blue, linen coats threw glances of weary interest toward the new-comer, and Mr. Withershaw, despite his years, paid the usual tribute of male servility to the suzerainty of sex. His meed of respectful admiration was rendered the more easily in that the girl, who held a letter packet in her hand, came to the very *guichet* at which he stood. When she was at his side, Mr. Withershaw noticed that round her neck hung a cameo on a fine gold chain. To his surprise, he recognised that cameo. The next instant he

revised his mental language and recalled its exact fellow, for an adornment that had been the pride of his sister-in-law (and she for some years already in her grave) could hardly be the same as one now worn by a young woman of easy manners in a French gambling town. Such, at least, was his instinctive feeling. But once more, and as rapidly, was he constrained to adjust his theorising, when he observed a slight flaw on the upper edge of the ornament and the singular delicacy of the whole, both in colour and workmanship. "Very curious!" he thought. "I must look into this." And deferring for the time being more detailed effort of memory, he turned an accomplished mind to the problem of picking acquaintance with the wearer of the cameo. It was not difficult. Postal *guichets* are small and fragments of paper awkward to pick up. As Mr. Withershaw fumbled for his receipt, the young woman thrust her letter to the registration clerk. A touch of hands, a smiling apology, a trivial reference to post-office convenience—and a few minutes later the two were leaving the building in easy and amicable conversation.

Mr. Withershaw, though aged, was no fool, and the girl, though young, no greenhorn. He was unafraid that his new acquaintance would stickle for the proprieties; she knew a rich Englishman when she saw one. The while her ready brain explored each avenue of possibility that led away from an encounter so opportune with a distinguished and wealthy foreigner, the memory of Mr. Withershaw was foraging the past for facts relative to the history of the cameo. His sister-

in-law had inherited the ornament from her grandmother, for whom it had been specially designed and made at the order of an exalted personage at the court of the first Napoleon. At the death of its second owner, the cameo had passed to her favourite nephew, Jack Dane-Vereker, brother of the present Earl of Shrivenham. He, poor fellow, fell in the Boer War. His widow—he had married a girl off the stage—Mr. Withershaw had seen but once. He remembered her as an elegant, pleasant-mannered little thing, not the ordinary chorus-girl at all, but a lady a decade in advance of the unconventionality of her time. What had become of her, he had no idea. Surely the cameo would have been given her by Dane-Vereker ; surely also she would have treasured it ? There could be no question of sale at the bidding of poverty. The Dane-Vereker family was very rich. And so Mr. Withershaw arrived at the conclusion to which, in effect, he had jumped, the moment that he felt first convinced of the identity of this unique ornament. He decided that the cameo had been stolen.

On the surface of his rapid thinking, as on that of his new and charming acquaintance, buzzed unceasingly the flies of casual conversation. The weather, the charms of St. Hilaire, the diversions of the Casino—all the small talk of fashionable holiday traced intricate patterns over the hidden depths of their respective calculations. By now the pair were back again on the terrace of the Régence and comfortably seated. Mr. Withershaw ordered

drinks. Cigarettes were lighted. Both parties began seriously to play for position.

After a while:

"Mademoiselle is alone in St. Hilaire?" queried Mr. Withershaw.

"And monsieur?" parried the girl.

Mr. Withershaw sighed.

"Alas!" he said. "Two solitaries!"

She smiled pleasantly.

"Monsieur laments the past."

With an amused glance Mr. Withershaw spread apologetic hands.

"You are too kind! I am an old man and my life is over. I have no right to look for more than passing courtesy from beauty and from youth."

She shot him a look of intimate respect.

"Men are never old," she murmured. "They are sometimes a little cruel, wherefore we poor women can value wisdom and experience—and gentleness."

He bowed.

"Already youth is born again with me! But I am a bird of passage—here to-day, gone to-morrow."

"Between to-day and to-morrow are the hours of——"

He laughed.

"That of course; but at my age one sleeps easier alone."

"I am not difficult," she replied.

"That is a beautiful cameo you are wearing." The change of subject was purposely abrupt.

She fingered the ornament absently.

"Yes, it is unusual. It was given me by a rich English lady—years ago—when I was her maid in London."

"You were a lady's maid? An exquisite one, I am sure, but a little unsettling for your mistress's husband. As for 'years ago,' mademoiselle exaggerates. One is not a lady's maid in short frocks."

"It seems so long ago!" she answered. "I have been unlucky. After my English mistress died I returned to Paris. I was eighteen or nineteen then, and life was without secret for me. So it fell that I invited misfortune—and misfortune came."

"Tell me," urged Mr. Withershaw.

The young woman looked him reflectively in the eyes. She saw a very genial and benevolent old gentleman awaiting with interest the beginning of her story. That he was thinking of women he had known who lied as cleverly as she, that he was wondering whether her tale would do credit or otherwise to her capacity for invention, she was unaware. Perhaps she did not greatly mind. This was a business interview, and in salesmanship the art of selling-talk is worth cultivation for its own sake. Wherefore she considered a suitable opening for her narrative, and preferred the philosophic to the colloquial method.

THE LADY'S MAID'S TALE

LA CHAMBRE DES MILLE PAONS

By NORMAN DAVEY

COMMENT c'est drôle, the things that arrive. There is no end to them. Each one is unlike the other. When one is young —very young—one thinks all sorts of things. It is then that one imagines oneself to be very clever: that one makes up rules: that one says, "this is so and therefore that will be so": that one is quite sure of what is going to happen. When one is young one may be happy—one may be unhappy—but always one is certain and always one is a fool.

Do you ever dream those long dreams all through the night, as it seems when you wake, in which a thousand different things happen to you, without any order or any reason in them? The kind of dream in which you begin by sitting in front of a café at a small table of iron, drinking a *Del oso* with a friend, and then, suddenly, the table has grown as big as a dinner-table and you are sitting on it, afloat in the middle of the sea. And it is

no longer Pierre who is with you, but *Landru*, and you are *en pyjamas*. But it is not a bit cold on this sea, which is so full of seaweed that the water is thick and brown with it. And all the time Landru is explaining to you how it was necessary and quite right to kill all his wives. You know it *is* Landru, although he has no beard and is quite a young man, and you feel very sorry for him and friendly, and when he begins bending down and pulling up the seaweed, which he says is good to eat, you are happy to eat it with him. But while your hands are full of the wet, brown seaweed, and before you can eat any of it, the floating table and the young Landru and the sea have vanished, and the seaweed in your hand is no longer seaweed, but pink insertion which Madame has given you to sew into the *smoking* of Monsieur. You are seated on a chair in the Bois and still *en pyjamas*, but no one notices that; until a gendarme comes up and lifts his cap and says, very politely: "Pardon, mademoiselle, but the Duc de Vichânes presents his compliments to you and would be glad of the return of his pyjamas" . . . and then you are in a taxi and the Duc is really a little dog on the seat opposite. . . .

Life is very much a dream of this kind. There is no sort of connection between this thing and the next thing. You never know what will happen or why this has happened. There are no rules.

When one is young one asks "Why?" One thinks there is a reason, a system in this life-dream. One is not content simply to watch and to be amused. For many years now I have

watched things happen. It is like sitting in the *fauteuils* of a great theatre. A theatre with a stage that may be large or small and with many actors or with few: with an ever-changing *décor*; with an unending series of unconnected scenes. At first one tries to guess what will happen in the next scene. . . . Afterwards, one simply watches.

That is the *métier*—the particular *métier*—of a lady's maid. She is inside, and yet not a part of, so many houses. She is, as it were, on the stage and in the stalls at one and the same time. She is the privileged spectator: she is *l'habilleuse*: she sees the artists *sans maquillage*.

There is nothing that is hid from her, and yet . . . When I was young, very young—*ma foi*, I am not old now!—I thought I knew. I was proud of knowing so much. All the makeshifts—all the lies and excuses of the *bourgeoisie*. How mean are the rich: how *chétif*, the poor: how stupid, the virtuous: how cruel, the stupid: how *polisson*, the clever. In this *métier* one is always *espion dans la maison*: one sees everything; hears everything—and says nothing. In those days I had pride in myself; pride in knowing so much. I knew my way about: I was not to be deceived. I understood men and women in the world. I knew what women wanted: what men wanted; and how they tried to get what they each desired. I knew my life: on me, as you say, there were no flies. I looked around me, *à la maison, au café, dans les rues*, and I said every day to myself, '*Je sais tout.*'

Ah! in those days I was young: *j'étais bête*.

Now I know better; and I say to-day, *on ne sait rien. Vraiment!* Of life, *tout à fait rien.*

Of those days (two—five—ten years ago? It seems so long) I will tell you this story—*une petite histoire drôle.* Then: when I thought I was free from flies, and they were yet thick on me *comme sur la viande pourrie.* You know Paris? Yes? Then do you know Picât—*la maison Picât*? No? Well, there are many who live in Paris and yet have never heard of Picât. Picât is a restaurant of a very special kind. It is the first of its kind; but it is not its *cuisine* which makes it famous; no, nor yet its *caves.* You will eat a better *filet de sole chez* Marigny, *huitres chez* Prunier, *soufflé chez* Foyot, and at Paillard or Larue or the Café de Paris you can drink whatever wine or *fine* you care to pay for. Picât has only champagne on his list.

But Picât keeps his *clientèle* by other means. He has the finest *salons particuliers* in Paris: that is the speciality of his house.

In those days I was *femme de chambre* at the Villepiques'. They had a flat in the Avenue d'Eylau.

They were a young couple, and had been married about four years when I came to town. They seemed still very fond of each other—but they had no children—and, one never knows. Monsieur was some years older than Madame, he being thirty and she only twenty-four. The flat was large and very well furnished, for although Monsieur made but little out of his books, he was also *rentier,* and Madame's father had been Emil Stolze, a big

man on the Bourse and *millionaire*. Did I say that Villepique was *un homme de lettres*? He was André Villepique, author of *Entretenue* and *Vierge malgré elle*. You have heard of him? No? He was not well known. His books, bound in blue leather, were in the library; but I could never read them: *ils m'ennuyaient*. When you can see so much around one every day it is a folly to read books about it.

I had not been in the house many days before I learnt that Madame's relations thought she had thrown herself away upon André Villepique. That is not surprising: I thought so myself. I did not like Monsieur: a tall lamp-post of a man, with big eyes and a great idea of how clever he was. He used to look through me as if I were made of glass. I might have been furniture for all the notice he took of me. Although he was Parisian, an Englishman (I beg Monsieur's pardon) could not have been more *gauche*. And Madame was not only rich, but she was very lovely. It was always a delight to me to dress her: she paid for the trouble you took, and she had the most lovely hair imaginable. It was very long and thick and silken, and the time which she spent on it with the brush, and the care in dressing it afterwards, was not wasted. The hair of some mistresses I have been with! Good enough in shaded lamp-light, perhaps, after an hour spent upon it; but, *mon Dieu*, in bright light before the mirror! Short, so that it has to be wound over the pad: stiff like wire: coming away with the comb: black at the roots, where the *peroxide* has not got

at it. . . . Madame's hair was not of that sort, but natural gold. *Et quelle taille!* and a skin like velvet. *Et sa figure,* with her two large blue eyes, so that the men turned round to look at her in the street. Ah, Madame could have had her pick. But she must go and marry Villepique! Bah!

She loved monsieur as far as I could see. For six months I was in the house and never a sign of a lover; though, to be sure, that was not the fault of the men. Monsieur le Comte d'Esnault-Lébine alone gave me a hundred francs a week to do what I could. . . . When Madame's relations came once a fortnight to dinner and quarrelled with Monsieur, Madame always took his part. *Mais, on ne sait jamais.*

I have told you about *la maison Picât.* It is not that I have been to such a place—*avec un Monsieur . . . au salon . . . mais non, je ne suis pas fille, moi . . .* no, but Auguste is a waiter *chez* Picât, and he was a great friend of mine. *Il était un bon type, et il m'adorait—follement.* He showed me all the rooms at Picât: that is how I know all about it. They are very beautiful; there are no others like them in Paris, for each *salon* is decorated in a different way—to suit each kind of taste.

There is *le salon du printemps,* in which the walls are painted to look like green trees and the carpet is green like grass and sprinkled with little white flowers; and the divan is piled high with green and yellow cushions, *comme les glaïeuls dans la laîche au bord de la rivière.* It is the room of the spring, and the ceiling is of the palest blue as if it

were the sky, and the *salon* is lighted by an army of tiny electric lamps hidden behind the four walls under the ceiling; for a narrow space, only a *centimetre* wide, is left around the walls at the top, so that the light from all these lamps is reflected on to the blue ceiling, and it is as if one was dining *en plein air*. The small square table in the middle of the room is of plain deal wood, painted white, with a shallow green china bowl in the centre, streaked with brown; and upon the water in the bowl floats a great white *nénuphar* (*comment dites-vous ?*—lily of the water ?) asleep above its green leaves. If it is cold weather, the room is warmed with a log upon the brick hearth, under a black *marmite*, and always the air is heavy with the scent of the *muguet*. If, by any chance, Mademoiselle is very young—*particulièrement, si elle a les cheveux roux, c'est ici que les choses se passent* —it is here where one dines. It is all arranged in the same manner—*partout, même dans la toilette, au coin, derrière le rideau de vert olive, il y a les carreaux de malachite, le bidet en jade*. . . . Then there is the *salon blanc*, which is all white, with a carpet in black and white squares, like a chessboard, and a round table of alabaster. . . . And the *salon noir*, in which everything is black, except the *table dorée* and the cushions in cloth of gold, and the lamp, a great globe *de nacre*, which hangs from the middle of the black ceiling. And there is a red room. . . .

But the most beautiful of all, and the one for which Picât is most famous, is the *chambre des mille paons*.

Here are painted on the walls a thousand peacocks. It is said that Picât engaged *un japonais* to do the work—one of the greatest painters in the world. The ceiling is of gold, with here and there great peacock's eyes of purple and crimson and blue and green, staring down upon you. The carpet is of gold and purple, and the great *divan* which fills one end of the room is covered with blue silk, like the sea of the *côte d'azur*, and the big cushions are sewn all over with real peacock's feathers. Four balls of crystal, covered with the wings of butterflies, hang from the ceiling by chains of gold, and fill the room with the softest light, staining with a dozen different colours the glass, set upon the table of lapis lazuli. . . . *Ah, elle est épatante, la chambre des mille paons*, and it is Auguste who is waiter in it.

He is a good fellow, is Auguste, as I have told you, and he is very proud of the room of the peacocks: his room: that is natural. He is pleased when a client, too, takes an interest in the *décor*—who is *artiste*—who is *sérieux*. . . .

It was my afternoon out, and I was sitting with Auguste outside the Café Morins. I had been with Madame Villepique about six months. Auguste sipped at his *Vermout cassis* and talked.

I didn't pay much attention to what he was saying. There is always so much to see in the street—*les messieurs qui suivent les filles : les coups d'œil :* the little comedies of the street : the frocks : the hats—and men always talk a lot about nothing . . . one does not listen. But suddenly I heard a name. . . .

"Villepique."

"*Comment?* *Villepique?*"

"But yes. As I was saying, a Monsieur Villepique—*exigeant!* He must see all the rooms —*le printemps, le blanc, le noir—tous.* But he would have nothing but the peacock; he has taste, this Villepique, I admit; and if Mademoiselle is a *blonde,* nothing could be more suitable. There are those who prefer the black room, but they are *barbares,* these. There is only the room of the peacocks for your true *blonde.* Mademoiselle Yvonne *elle-même. . . .*"

"But this Villepique?"

"*Exigeant,* I tell you. He has reserved the room for the 15th: that is Saturday. He must have this and he must have that. The cushions must be changed. He is sending a great rug of black fur and *un parfum de luxe,* and he will not drink the *Piper,* but the *patron* must get some *Yquem* from Gaufroy. But yet I like a client who . . ."

"Why, it is *chez* Villepique where I am. . . ."

"*Comment?*"

"He is tall and dark, with a moustache. . . ."

"*Parfaitement.*"

"My friend, we should touch some money out of this."

"And how? If Monsieur wishes . . . *le patron* is . . ."

"*Tais-toi, donc:* let me think."

I walked back to the house as if I was in a dream. I saw nothing in the streets. I was thinking out a plan. Life is dear and one must live somehow; and if one can make a little money—honestly—

one should not let the chance slip away: for I am a good girl: *je ne suis pas gamine, comme les autres.*

That evening I heard Monsieur say to Madame: "On Saturday I am dining with *M. le deputé* Duprez. We have a lot of business to talk about, so I shall not be home until late. So don't wait up for me." And Madame said that in that case she would spend the evening at her mother's. To make it thus easy for *le vaurien, son mari!* I could have shaken her: *la petite innocente.* But I smiled to myself all the same, for I saw clearly that this would make it easier, also, for me: and I had a plan. It was not yet complete, but I thought I saw my way to gain a little money—and to punish the husband, *le sale type.* But I was young in those days, and I thought I knew everything.

Thursday was my evening out, but Madame said that as both she and Monsieur would be out on Saturday evening, would I mind changing my day to Saturday? But, certainly, I would not mind doing that: it fitted in admirably with my plan. "Could I go a little earlier on Saturday, in that case?" I asked Madame. "Say at three o'clock?" It was not really necessary, this: but as I was amiable enough to change my day for Madame's convenience, it was only just that I should gain something out of it, too. One should always live up to one's principles. Also, it would afford me an opportunity to see Auguste during the afternoon and arrange details.

I had thought over this affair for nearly a week. I was quite sure now in my mind how to manage it. But it had not been easy. First, I had thought

of going to Monsieur and threatening to tell everything I knew unless he gave me money. I did not like Villepique, but I did not consider him altogether a fool. If I threatened to expose him, before the date of the *rendezvous*, he could always alter it; and what evidence had I of any value? —for the word of a *femme de chambre* is worth nothing. On the other hand, if I waited until after the *rendezvous*, I still had no evidence but my word for it: Auguste and Picât would, of course, swear that Monsieur was never there; they are discreet; it is their *métier* to be that. It was clearly useless to go to Madame. If she disbelieved me, I would lose my place: if she believed me, I was hardly likely to be better off. No: I would go to Madame's brother . . . *C'était une bonne idée, ça.* Joseph Stolze lived in a large flat in the *rue de Courcelles*. He was not married. It is always better in the affair of this sort to deal with a man alone—*célibataire*: *certes, il y avait sa maîtresse; mais, ça ne ferait rien.*

I knew my Joseph Stolze; he, above all the family, had been against his sister marrying André Villepique. Joseph could hardly speak civilly to André when he met him in the street. If anyone would be happy to pay me for my knowledge it was Joseph Stolze—*quoiqu'il fût juif.*

It is very convenient, the telephone. On Saturday I rang up Monsieur Joseph Stolze. I made it clear to him that it was a matter of importance to him to be at home at nine o'clock, when I would call upon him; but I did not say who I was. Then I rang up Auguste to tell

him to meet me at the Café Morins at four o'clock.

I had more trouble with Auguste than I expected. His honour was involved in the affair: clients had always trusted to his discretion: there was M. Picât, and so on. But I persuaded him at last. I explained how he ran no risk in the affair himself. He only had to leave the door of the peacock room unlocked—and not to be there when we went in. I also showed him there was money: he could expect at least ten louis: and then, as I have said, *il était fou de moi.*

M. Joseph received me in the *salle à manger.* He was surprised to see that it was only me; but I went to the point at once.

"M. Villepique," I said, "is, at this moment, dining *en cabinet particulier avec une grue,* whilst Madame believes him to be *chez M. le deputé Duprez.*"

"— *de Dieu!*"

"*Monsieur!*"

"*Sans blague?*"

"I am not a liar. We can go there and prove it."

"Where?"

"Monsieur will understand that I have been very faithful to Madame in this matter. It has not been an easy affair. *J' n' suis pas mercenaire, moi, mais.* . . . Also, there is Auguste, the waiter *aux salons. Il était bien exigeant.* I had to promise him five hundred francs."

"They are there now?"

"*Oui, Monsieur.*"

"*Eh bien,* and how much do you want for yourself?"

"I leave that to Monsieur's generosity," I said modestly.

"A thousand francs . . ."

"Fifteen hundred francs, *en tout.*"

M. Joseph made a face.

"You are quite sure of your facts?"

"Monsieur need not pay me until he has seen the facts for himself."

"Good! Where is it?"

"*Chez Picât.*"

"*Allons-y.*"

The entrance to the *salons particuliers* at Picât is not through the restaurant downstairs. There are two private entrances—one in the rue Lépic and the other in the Boulevard, so that Monsieur and Madame may, if need be, leave by different doors. We entered by the rue Lépic: Auguste met us at the top of the stairs: he vanished through a side-door after a few whispered words with me. M. Joseph followed me down the corridor.

"This is the room," I said in a low voice to Monsieur; "it is not locked. Shall I knock?"

"*Ma foi, non!*" muttered Joseph Stolze. "We will give our dear André a little surprise."

He turned the handle softly and opened the door suddenly. I followed closely behind him, and in a moment we were in the peacock room.

The first thing I saw from behind Monsieur's back was the table. It was littered with fruit dishes and coffee cups and liqueur glasses: a cigarette-end smouldered in a silver *cendrier*: the

dregs of coffee lay in the cups : one glass was still half full of *fine* : the skin and stones of peaches lay in the plates. The two chairs had been pushed back from the table and they were empty. So much I saw, when Joseph Stolze stepped forward with a stifled cry and I saw the other part of the room.

There was no sign of André Villepique, but from among the pile of cushions on the *divan* had sprung up a slender figure. She looked more than ever lovely as she stood there framed against the dark rich colours of the *divan*. Her long fair hair hung loose over her shoulders. She was dressed only *en chemise* and with one stocking on : the other lay among the cushions. Although I had dressed her every day for many months, I had never seen Madame Villepique look more beautiful as she stood there before us, the frail piece of black silk half slipping off the only shoulder on which it hung, and her white skin gleaming against the blue and black of the *décor*. But I was too amazed to enjoy, at that moment, her beauty : I could only stare at her, speechless with surprise. " Marcelle, what are you doing here ? " cried Joseph Stolze, in a terrible voice. And then he swung round on me. " You have lied to me ! "

I could only babble : " But it was Monsieur who arranged this : it was Monsieur whom Auguste saw."

" You saw him ? "

" No ; but he gave the name, and Auguste . . ."

And then I saw it all in one flash. Madame's lover had given the name of her husband to make

it more safe . . . in case of any indiscretion . . . any scandal. How many men are tall and dark and carry the moustache? Oh, I had been a fool! And where was my fifteen hundred francs now? I had done for myself. I could have cried —there, in front of Madame and Monsieur Joseph.

"What—why, why are you . . . Joseph, I have been dining with André," stammered Madame.

"I see," sneered Monsieur, "*en chemise*: charming, to be sure. Who is your lover? Where is he?"

"*Que tu es bête!*" cried Madame, stamping with her bare foor on the carpet. "I tell you it is André."

Joseph Stolze began to laugh: it was not a pleasant laugh. It was the kind of laugh for which people have died before they had time to finish it. It was a laugh that ran up his face in successive spasms from his double chin to his bald head with the fine black hair streaks across it: a laugh that arched his eyebrows—that made to bristle the upturned points of his moustache—a laugh in which his hands and his shoulders took part. It was a devil of a laugh; it was to have been a long laugh. But he never finished that laugh. For half-way through it, the purple curtains at the far end of the room opened and through them came André Villepique. He was in his shirt and trousers, and he held a scent spray in one hand and a hair brush in the other. He stared stupidly at the scene before him. *Mon Dieu*, but it must have seemed strange enough to him. Madame, her

face flushed in anger, half in and half out of her *chemise*: Stolze, with his unfinished laugh frozen into a smile, as it were, half-way up his face: myself, with open mouth, gaping at him.

"André!" gasped Monsieur Joseph, at last, in a dry cackle of a voice.

"I told you it was André. You always were a fool, Joseph."

"But why—what—why . . ." gabbled Stolze.

"*Qu'est-ce que tu fais ici? Grosse bête! Va-t' en! Va-t' en!*"

"Why? Why?" repeated Monsieur Joseph. "I do not understand, I . . ."

"If my husband wishes to ask me out to dinner . . ." began Madame.

But André Villepique broke in.

"It is a simple matter. What kills marriage is that there is no romance, no secrecy—nothing to hide. If I care to make a *rendezvous* with my wife, as though she were not my wife . . . and dine *en cabinet* . . ."

"But haven't you got a bedroom in your house?" began Joseph Stolze, in a bewildered voice.

"Bah! Cannot you see, the psychology? The romance? At home it is the rule, like—like the *petit déjeuner*. . . ."

Joseph Stolze threw himself down on the *divan* and shook with laughter, while Monsieur and Madame glared at him. At last he pulled himself together.

"*Allons, ma p'tite,*" he cried, jumping up. "*Nous laisserons les deux adultères ensemble!*"

But I did not laugh, and outside the door—

"There is yet," I said, "the five hundred francs for Auguste."

"I do not give something for nothing," said Joseph Stolze.

Ah! in those days I was young.

I thought I knew everything. I should have insisted on having the money first.

To-day, I would know better.

To-day, I say to myself every morning and every evening: *"P'tite, tu es innocente: tu es novice, même: et maintenant encore, tu ne sais rien!"*

"Poor child!" said Mr. Withershaw, when the story was over. "You had bad luck indeed. And so you came from Paris and a disgusted Auguste to try your chance at St. Hilaire among old fools like me? Well, you shall have a reward for your pretty tale. We will go to the casino and play a little. Here are the 'five hundred francs for Auguste.' Let us see if you can make a thousand of them."

She took the money indifferently, with a formal word of thanks. From the Régence, the oddly matched pair walked down the broad street that led to the gambling-rooms.

END OF PART II

PART III

THE COMMISSARY OF POLICE

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IT was very hot in the office of the Commissary of Police for the town and district of St. Hilaire. M. Lesueur sat in his shirt-sleeves at an untidy desk and sought a moment of relief in a cigarette and the evening paper. The sunshine of late afternoon blazed on the white houses opposite his window. The duties of Commissary in a place like St. Hilaire are arduous, and it is particularly unfortunate that, during the summer weather, when most men have their greatest leisure, those responsible for the good behaviour of a mixed and ever-changing population should be compelled most diligently to follow their profession.

"Ghostly manifestations," read M. Lesueur. "The Château de la Hourmerie reputed spectre-ridden." The unpretentious paragraph, thus headlined, held immediately the attention of the police officer. Carefully he perused the dozen lines of small, smudged type.

"For long enough the reputation of the Château de la Hourmerie has been unenviable, but not until

now has its sinister character been attributed to supernatural causes. During the last day or two strange noises—cries, knockings, and mysterious clatter—have been heard by persons ranging the borders of the estate. The peasantry will not enter the grounds of the château, which, although not in the market, has never been regularly tenanted, and it is improbable that even now news of the curious manifestations above referred to would have been made public, had not Jacques Tournebroche, a woodman, when under the influence of wine, spoken of his experience in passing that portion of the park wall nearest to the château itself. His recital took place in a local café, and he was overheard by a representative of the ——. Surely the local police, whose intelligence is so highly praised by official bumbledom, should before now have investigated the causes of the isolation and suspect character of the fine property and château of la Hourmerie ? "

M. Lesueur laid down the paper and rang a bell at his side. The uniformed gendarme that appeared in answer to the summons stood at silent attention.

" Fetch me," said the Commissary, " the envelope and papers from Montillan, sent in by Toussaint this morning. Also his report. Also the translations, that should now be ready."

In a few minutes he was laying out on the desk a number of documents, of which the majority were dirty and damp-stained. Among them, however, several sheets of cleaner, more official

paper shone coldly prominent, and one of these the Commissary proceeded first to read.

"The enclosed documents were picked up by one of my men at the cross-roads where, from the main road from St. Hilaire to Montillan, strikes off the lane leading to the Château de la Hourmerie and to the village of the same name. As I am unable to trace any connection between these papers and information in the records at this sub-office, I forward them for the consideration of higher authority.

"(Signed) TOUSSAINT."

M. Lesueur then turned to the more bulky and the dingier items in the dossier. They consisted of three rough bundles of soft, irregularly torn paper, dimly patterned on one side, pencil written on the other, and so stained with damp as only with difficulty to be decipherable. Attached to each was a neat French translation, for the text scribbled on the sheets of paper was in English, and M. Lesueur had not sufficient knowledge of that language to rely on his own reading of the faint manuscript originals. Glancing at the translated versions, he found, to his dismay, that the untidy bundles of manuscript were only short stories. This, indeed, he had suspected when first examining them, but had distrusted his knowledge of English and his capacity for deciphering the foreign script. It was possible that they might turn out more interesting. Full of hope, he had ordered their complete rendering

into French, only to find confirmed his original belief.

Disappointed and a little out of temper, he forced himself none the less to read through the tales, which, written apparently on pieces of wall-paper, had been picked up in the long grass of a country lane and submitted to his expert judgment. The first was headed THE POET'S TALE and entitled WINTRY PEACOCK. It read as follows: